

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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## FEAST AND FAMINE

Some things you cannot forget. It is hard to believe that 2 years have passed since I received an invitation by phone to attend a round table discussion in Washington DC along with 20 or so other women from around the country. I'm certain that the person on the other end of the call thought we had been cut off due to the deafening silence on my end. Before I go any further, a disclaimer. I'm not telling you this story because I'm a namedropper. It's not my style. I'm also not telling you this story to impress the new boss. That's not my style either. For reasons not always so clear to me – still - I received an invitation to a luncheon conversation on behalf of the First Lady. Five days from receiving the call. Pay your own way. Yes that would be with Michelle Obama in the room. Of course, when you receive such an invitation, it is a good idea to say yes. Once I recovered and could speak, I did not of course say well let me think about it and get back to you. You hang up and then the anxiety rushes in. Did that just happen? Where do I go? What do I say? What will I do? Why me? All legitimate questions you know. But of course the most terrifying question of all: What will I wear? Not a time to show up inappropriately dressed.

It was a veritable feast in every way as you can imagine. Everyone showed up. The food was good but not the main attraction. There was not a dismissive arrogant voice in the bunch. That was a table we all agreed we needed and wanted to be around. People were dressed appropriately. Peaceful, lovely and engaging gathering. All women.

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Philanthropists, attorneys, business owners, military officers, non-profit directors, educators, movie producers, civic leaders and me. The clergy. Nevertheless, invited as a member of the clergy, the clerical collar and the old but newly dry cleaned suit worked just fine. Fashion dilemma solved. We were there, invited as not only women leaders, but LGBT identified ones to tell our stories. What was it like to live as families, partners, people, citizens, and parents, in the proverbial famine of inequality? The First Lady really wanted to know. It dawned on me then and still does now that it's never really feast OR famine, but feast AND famine because these concepts continually operate simultaneously, always and everywhere throughout our lives, collectively and individually. I'm not so sure it's realistic to think that we ever get one without the other in some form, which might be an odd idea to some of you. But if you pay any attention to your own life or the life of the world, I think you might get what I mean. We've made remarkable progress in regard to same gender/LGBT equality in this country for example. I smiled broadly at the photos on Facebook a few days ago of my luncheon table mate from Virginia right beside me that day in Washington, DC – their beautiful family of two moms and two children now legally married and recognized this past week based on the Supreme Court's most recent decision to forego hearing same gender cases from 5 states, adding Virginia, Indiana, Oklahoma, Utah and Wisconsin to the list of states, now 24, allowing same gender marriage. Needless to say, we know without a doubt that there are plenty and numerous manifestations of inequality we can name today without

question, here and around the world, which suggests that our work and our hope require relentless persistence, not to mention showing up, day after day.

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But speaking of things one might LIKE to forget, I turn to the gospel narrative we just heard from the Book of Matthew. Otherwise known as the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. What does one do with death, destruction, darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth? Disturbing to say the least. Vanderbilt Divinity School University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies Amy Jill Levine characterizes this particular parable instructively: “It ends with dead slaves, a burned city, dinner guests who are compelled to attend the party, and an expelled guest doomed to torture because he lacked the right outfit. That any of this speaks to what the kingdom of heaven is like should come as a surprise. If the parable is about salvation, then it is about a type of salvation in which free will is obviated. If the parable is about the grace of the divine, then it is a grace that burns an entire city because of the sins of a few of its citizens. If the parable is about a messianic banquet, then it is a banquet that nobody eats. If the lord or king in the parable is God, then we should wonder if this is the type of God we want to worship.”

Professor Levine has a point. This parable should disturb us. And as she suggests, if we hear it and are not disturbed, there is something seriously amiss with our moral compass. It should be obvious and

better that we see it as not about heaven or final judgment but about kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice. “Furthermore,” she writes, “one does not even need to technically believe in or worship Jesus for the parables to have meaning. The people who first heard him did not, at first, worship Jesus. But they did pay attention because for those with ears to hear and some patience to ponder, the parables spoke to their hearts. Amy Jill Levine returns to these stories again and again because they are at the heart of her own

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Judaism. They challenge, provoke, convict, and at the same time amuse.” “These,” she says, “are pearls of Jewish wisdom, and if we hear them in their original contexts by not mapping onto their cultures and contexts our own values and expectations, and avoid the anti Jewish interpretation that frequently deforms them, they gleam with a shine that cannot be hidden. The parables, if we take them seriously not as answers but as invitations, can continue to inform our lives, even as our lives continue to open up the parables to new readings. Jesus knew that the best teaching comes from stories with memorable characters who are both familiar and strange, who play upon our stereotypes even as they confront them. That learning how to live and live abundantly does not come from spoon fed data or an answer sheet.”

This morning if we are honest with one another and ourselves, for many of us our understanding and our questions of God is the map by which we locate the setting of our life, from which and toward we receive our being and identify ourselves. And so it follows that the kind of God at

work in our lives will determine ultimately the shape and quality and risk and center of our existence. It does matter who God is to us. But in most cases we might prefer a God who is bland and domesticated, one who creates calm spaces for uninterrupted lives. Who doesn't crave that? This is why parables like today's disturb us because it goes beyond bland and domesticated characterizations and sketches a different kind of image or understanding of God altogether. They require some imagination. For what it's worth, there are five different images of God, according to one contemporary Hebrew Scripture scholar, in the Isaiah text that Richard read for us. Walter Bruggemann suggests these images to be God as a demolition squad, a safe place for poor

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people, the giver of the biggest feast you've ever heard of, a powerful sea monster and a gentle nursemaid. Of course this all sounds so odd to us in our current contemporary domesticated location. But if we truly think about our lives and that of others and our common need for hope and sustenance it may not seem so far fetched. We think of how quickly our own capacities and that of others to right our lives are reached. And so, the Scriptures, for better or for worse, present a host of images because no single one is really adequate. We will gravitate to different ones depending on where on the spectrum in life between feast and famine we find ourselves. There is a convergence nevertheless of all of these metaphors. Writes Bruggemann: "the demolition squad wipes out oppression and lets freedom come, the safe refuge stops fear and gives weak ones a chance, the banquet ends hunger and offers satisfaction, the swallowing sea monster ends the

threat of death's diminishment and lets us live unencumbered, the nursemaid moves us from tears to well being. All of these images and metaphors, when we have run out of our own devices, offer us a new chance or a new perspective. And it is newness that is not just a sheer act of willpower, but is an act God takes for and toward us." It is an invitation of sorts that we ought not dismiss so readily. And yet, who would have expected the host in the parable of the wedding banquet today to act as he did after a wonderful gesture of inclusiveness? Maybe it means that when we get invited to a new metaphor we have to respond and define our lives in terms of it. If I take God as a feast giver, I conduct myself a guest at a feast. A wedding is a time for newness and joy and generosity – and having just experienced my own wedding feast not too long ago – I get that metaphor – and nonetheless we must give signs that we are prepared for newness and joy and willing to carry on with some buoyancy as

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well as some imagination. Apparently, the man in the parable today came dressed as though he were attending a funeral and it would not work. Walter Bruggemann understands that when we come to grips with and struggle with these images of God, we cannot be innocent bystanders who watch with indifference as God is variously sketched. We cannot act as though the character of God has nothing to do with us. Our work and our hope in the presence of the Holy are to recharacterize our lives in the life of God as best we are able. It is about showing up, despite all the fears, barriers and reasons to suggest we are unworthy of such an invitation. In the banquet scene and all of these metaphors, these are images of a God who desires to end

what is old and tired and damaging, to us and to others. These are invitations to newness, unencumbered by fear, hunger, death or tears. It has everything to do with us and we are summoned to receive this newness, this wholeness. And to turn loose from the deathliness and darkness that surrounds us. A seventeen-year-old Nobel Peace Prize recipient named Malala Yousafzai reminds us and tells us something about that. We are invited to live in a world of God's timeless invitation to newness and imagination, a world that encompasses both feast and famine. We are compelled to respond to what that demands of us.

Recalling that invitation and experience two years ago in Washington DC, there were all sorts of barriers and reasons to say no or to doubt its merit, self-imposed or not. For one, this rural raised Catholic Western New York middle class first generation college grad – more so a non-Ivy or Stanford grad - wasn't worthy of such an invitation to be in the same room with a First Lady and other extraordinary women. Surely there were others that should be but not me.

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There was the pragmatic barrier of cost and short notice to arrange such a trip just as the new academic year had begun here. But barriers and fears sometimes have to be put aside when it's time to get dressed and go. This Episcopal priest, ironically more religious but less pious these days, needed to show up with a personal and vocational agency as well as voice and story to help mete out equality, justice and compassion. This was a feast that I never imagined being invited to. I am convinced now more than ever that you and I are both invited and called to places we thought we would never

go. Places of feast and famine. So let's eat but stay hungry. Stay hungry for justice, for peace, for compassion, for life, for love, for transformation, for hope, for newness, not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of all people for all time and in all places.

Amen.