10-11-26

My mother was a teacher for most of her adult life. She taught a range of subjects, mostly related to language, in both public and private schools. When she retired, she found a very small house in Springfield, MA, where she'd taught for decades, and lived there happily and very modestly. We didn't always "get" or appreciate her frugality when we were kids and it meant coupons and sales and not always getting things we thought we wanted, but I sure did when I started to understand how much she did with very little. I remember in particular the first time I went to her house after she had died. It's a moment that, if you've experienced it yourself, you know it's hard to find words to express. It's surreal yet very real given all that one is feeling. There are two things I remember most. First, it was early December, and I hadn't been at the house for a few weeks. My mother expected to return from the hospital, and all over the house were small piles of presents, neatly arranged, one for each person, most already wrapped and ready. The second was her checkbook, which she'd left on the kitchen table with a pen on top. It was open to the very last page of many, each filled with entries that read "St. Luke's,""Red Cross," a long list of other charities, and each of the many schools she and each of us, her four children, had ever attended. Entry after entry in small, impeccable print. And what struck me was that in her last moments at home she was doing what I would later learn she did for decades. She was making sure that no matter what else might have been going on in her life, everyone got their donation. And quite honestly, for me, who could have been doing better in my own giving, who probably had more capacity to give, that moment was something I can only characterize as *a wakeup call*. Pure and simple, that little splash of cold water that wakes us up, helps us to see something in a new way, and perhaps even changes us.

My friends, today's readings are not easy, and what I want to suggest is simply that all three are wakeup calls. And that wakeup calls are never easy but sometimes are necessary and just what we need. The gospel passage we just heard is notorious for being difficult to hear and to understand, and it is. And I would suggest that that's because it's a wakeup call, delivered as they often were in the place and time that Jesus inhabited, quite different from ours, with raw urgency. I might have been able to stumble over my wakeup call in a later decade of life and finally learn something I should have much earlier. But Jesus's wakeup call was urgent. He proclaimed it with no time to waste. The time to wake up was now. And so he turned to classic techniques such as storytelling, vivid imagery, and a degree of hyperbole that can be unsettling for us.

Each of today's readings is a wakeup call and here's the message. *We know what really matters. It's time to make that our focus.* It's not dissimilar, really, to the wakeup call I got in my mother's house. I knew what mattered! I knew what deserved my attention and my care. But I needed to make that my focus. It's just a couple of years now since I heard someone I respect offer a public talk. She said something that day that resonated deeply and that I knew would stick with me. "This is ancient wisdom," she said, "and it's both timeless and timely. We tend to ask 'What's my future?' The better question is 'What are my habits?'" Because our habits *are* our future. My habits are my future." Yes indeed. Her words offer another way to frame this bracing wakeup call maybe we didn't see coming when we made our way here on this cool fall morning, the wakeup call that isn't easy to hear but that's sometimes just what we need. What matters? What deserves our attention? What gets our attention? It's the small daily habits that simply *are* who we're becoming, us each, and us all, together.

The story from Exodus is of course well known. God has called Moses to liberate the people from bondage and servitude in Egypt. They've been rescued and led on a long, difficult trip, but have made it. They're home. They're safe and they're free. God has accompanied them the entire way bringing food and drink when needed. And God has asked for only one thing in return: fidelity; loyalty. That folks stick together as God's people, led now eternally by that same God who gave them life and who now provides home and the promise of endless generations. But what do those folks do instead? Oh yeah, the minute Moses is out of eyesight, they melt down all of their rings, form a mold, cast an image of a calf, and bow down not before that one, eternal, steadfast God, but this golden calf. The story seems impossible to some degree, but we get it. They knew what mattered and we do too. But they worshiped something other than God, and we do too, whether that's something that glitters like gold or just something that seems to have drawn all the others. Off we go too, until we get that wakeup call just as they did. We know what matters. We know what to do, what our daily habits ought to be. And it's time to do it and to live that way.

Paul's dealing with an interesting situation in Philippi. Two women who are leaders of the church he's founded have found themselves in a place where they don't see eye to eye. And it's starting to affect the community. Folks are starting to take sides; cracks are starting to appear in what's been a solid, united church family. These are leaders for whom Paul has enormous respect. He trusts them and knows that they are people of unquestioned integrity. And so his appeal to them is very simple. *You know what matters!* What unites us is so much greater than these few small points of difference. Paul offers them a striking image. You're here because of Jesus, he says, and Jesus is the one who gave everything up. Who could have fought back but didn't. Who yielded what was in his own interest for the sake of love and for the sake of all. *You are persons of love*, Paul reminds the two leaders! You are persons who are giving up much to gather and equip others in the name of one who self-emptied to bring peace, to unite and to liberate. Surely you can yield just a little something, just a little bit to each other. In a time of division, we all know what matters. We know our call. Can we yield just a little something, can we listen to the other and walk this together? Can this be the small, daily habit that *is* our future?

And then of course finally we come to the gospel. And yes, there's no question about it, it's a wakeup call and it's not an easy one to hear. The storytelling is vivid and obviously hyperbolic. A person invites people to his son's wedding but every invitee not only scoffs at the idea of attending but mistreats those sent with the invitation, even killing some of them. Retribution follows, a new guest list is issued and all seems OK until a guest arrives wearing the "wrong garment" and is thrown out of the party into the "outer darkness." It's rough. But here's the point. We *know* we've been invited to a wondrous banquet. We know that God longs for us to return to the realm for which we were born, the kingdom of peace and love and self-yielding and, yes, the devotion and dedication to God and to each other that we know is the essence of our call, full stop. We know that. And yet we fall short of that dedication, both to God and to each other. This gospel story is a wakeup call and it simply says: You know the joy, the "banquet" for which you were born. You know the world, created and sustained by God, that's waiting to receive you and welcome you home as it always has! So why live this way? Why live in division, in worship of the passing and the ephemeral, in nonsense, really. It's time to live that simple walk we all know is our future, both each of ours and all of ours. It's time to say yes to the eternal invitation, show up, wear and bring the best of the best, and come back tomorrow and the next day and the day after that and forever. We've been shown our beautiful, eternal home. Let's go live there.