

You know the story. God called Abraham to follow in faith where God would tell him to go. In return Abraham was promised descendants, as numerous as the sand along the sea; and the Land of Canaan as their homeland. As the story goes, they settle in Canaan until a famine forces them to seek food in Egypt. One of their own was in charge of food distribution in Egypt and Joseph encourages them to remain with him. They remain in Egypt and the first of God's promises to Abraham begins to be fulfilled. They became so populous that the Egyptians fear their size. What if they should choose to fight on the side of our enemy? So to control them the Egyptians force them into slavery. Their lives as slaves become increasingly hard as the generations pass by. Then one of their own who had been raised in Pharaoh's Court was reminded by God of his second promise – a land of their own. So Moses is commissioned by God to release these slaves and lead them to the land of Canaan which was to be theirs.

Moses announces this good news to his people in slavery. Moses is told to say to the Israelites: "I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord."

What great news! After generations of slavery God was going to free them. You would expect the next line to read about the celebration that followed that announcement. The dancing and singing and reveling. But the next line reads: "... but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery."

There is something insidious about depression. When we are depressed we become preoccupied with our selves to the point that we don't even hear words of encouragement and advise. Did you ever try to talk someone out of their depression? You show them all the reasons why they should not be depressed, you point out all of their assets for living and their potential for accomplishing great things. They don't even hear you. It's like you're talking about someone else.

It has been estimated that the Israelites were in Egypt for about 400 years. Only during the last part of that time were they bound into slavery. But the promise of land had become dead. It wasn't a reality for them. "Let sleeping dogs lie! Our lot is to stay here and work our fingers to the bone making bricks and building the palaces and imperial buildings for the great Egyptian empire. I don't have the strength to consider other things.

"Look at all those guards; we could never escape alive anyway. What's the use. We are destined to work increasingly hard for the meager provisions they provide. Moses, you're out of touch with reality. God has really forgotten about us. Leave us alone." They were a broken people; broken bodies through

the daily toil of forced labor; broken spirits through their sense that God had abandoned them.

So God had to set out to win their trust. This God did through the process of the three way duel between Moses, Pharaoh and God. The next six chapters in Exodus detail this duel. God tells Moses to confront Pharaoh, and when he does Pharaoh and his people suffer some consequences, but then God relents and Pharaoh returns to his old self, and the cycle begins again. The slaves observe all of this. God is not dead. Moses' persistence produces hope. And by the time God is willing to finally let his people go, they are ready.

During the 40 years of desert wandering which followed there were many times when they wished they were back in Egypt; but again, at the end of that 40 years they were ready to move out across the Jordan and into the Land which God had promised as their inheritance. It takes energy and time, sometimes a lot of time, to heal and change to a positive constructive stance.

Slavery has always been with us. The Lewis and Clark expedition of 200 years ago included York, the slave of William Clark. Sacagawea, the Indian girl that served them so well when they met hostile Indian tribes, had been kidnapped from her own Shoshone tribe and sold to be the wife/slave of Toussaint Charbonneau, hired to be an interpreter for the expedition.

The climate when this congregation was founded was one of bitterness between those who were slave holders or supporters of the institution of slavery and those who felt slavery to be wrong and advocated its abolition. In 1861 Civil War broke out and before it was over nearly half a million persons were killed.

Each year, in this country, there are some 15,000 men, women and children, mostly immigrants, who are forced into such jobs as domestic servants, restaurant workers and prostitutes - forced against their will. They are slaves in this richest country in this 21st Century.

But there is another kind of slavery rampant in our culture. It is a slavery caused by our own weakness. Methamphetamine enslaves countless persons, as do the other mind altering drugs – including alcohol. Materialism has turned many of us into compulsive shoppers, buying things we do not need, or sometimes even do not want. ABC last Thursday evening aired a special dealing with shoplifting as an addiction. Gambling can enslave us. When I was serving as your interim one of the gambling referendums came up for vote, and I can remember some very heated discussions about that issue. Now gambling has passed in Waterloo and you soon will have a casino along the river. We have seen persons addicted to many of these elements of our world, and if we are honest with ourselves we have our own addictions and know how it takes a toll on every aspect of their lives – broken bodies and broken spirits.

The New Testament reading, which is from the lectionary for today, is an interesting parable. Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a wedding banquet which a king gives for his son. He goes to great effort to prepare for this feast, slaughtering enough oxen and fatted calves to feed several hundred people. He invites all the respectable folk, as you would expect the king to do, then, as was probably the custom, he sent his slaves out twice to remind those invited to

attend. Not only do the invited guests refuse to attend, but some of them seize his slaves and kill them. In response, the king sends his troops to burn their city.

Then the king sends his slaves out into the heart of the city to invite everyone they see – all of the addicted ones - to the wedding. So the slaves went out and gathered all they could find, both the good and the bad, to the feast so that the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Matthew admits that this is an allegory. The king represents God. The wedding feast represents the messianic banquet. The invited guests who refused to come were the leaders of the Jewish establishment. The slaves who were killed were the prophets and early Christian missionaries. And the invitation to the bad and the good represented the church's outreach to both gentiles and Jews. Seen in this way, the parable becomes a radical invitation. The table is spread for all to come. Those gathered from the streets, the common masses, those who are slaves to any number of society's ills, have no reason or right to be there – except that they are invited by a gracious king. Jesus did not make light of people and their concerns, but poured out his life, both ultimately and on a daily basis, as he listened, healed, taught and loved people, both friends and strangers. Jesus is issuing the invitation for all to join him as God's guests in a banquet feast called the Kingdom of Heaven.

Life in the Kingdom is a party where God is the host and all of us have received a royal invitation. But just as the host must prepare for the banquet so must the guests. One of the guests was improperly dressed and is thrown out of the banquet – quite a contrast to the inclusive tone of the first part of the parable.

To wear a wedding garment is to know the significance of the occasion, to allow God's gracious invitation to change our lives, and to live accordingly. The dinner guest has received a gift from the king – the invitation to a joyous, elaborate feast – to which he has not responded appropriately. When God gives us a gift it becomes our responsibility to use that gift responsibly.

Broken bodies and broken spirits are all about us. They make up the town square to which the King's slaves were finally sent. And the invitation of the King is to them – to us – to share in the great feast, the Kingdom of God. So prepare yourself that you might appear worthy and be a part of that community that can help to mend broken bodies and broken spirits.