

Sermon on October 11, 2020
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Grace Church | Red Hill

Last week, as I drove by the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden at The Walker Art Center, I caught a glimpse of a new sculpture. It's hard to miss: it's in the shape of a **gigantic blue rooster, and I mean blue, so blue, piercing blue**. As I found out later, the sculpture itself is almost 13 feet tall and stands on top of a 10-foot pedestal. The rooster calls attention to itself.

I did a little research on it and I found out that the German artist Katharina Frisch created it. She is known for taking everyday objects and giving them a new twist. When I saw it, I thought of the very real Rhode Island Red rooster that Bellair Farm's farmer Michelle adopted earlier in the week from Dave and Erin Kershner, who have become urban chicken keepers but who didn't need to raise a rooster. **The blue rooster calls attention to itself and in so doing invites one to consider the everyday rooster in a new light, in a new way.** The blue rooster shows us what a real rooster is like by showing us what it is not.

Prayer and greeting

It happened to Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama. A few professional sports players declined their invitation to the White House on political principles. But when some players on the Golden State Warriors NBA championship team and players on the Philadelphia Eagles Super Bowl champions declined President Trump's invitation to the White House, Trump, in his insecure way, took it personally. Trump disinvited the whole team.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about an extremely insecure king, a story that draws attention to imperial violence and its very real alternative. The parable goes like this:

“The kingdom of heaven **has been likened to** a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but **they** would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But **they** made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. **The king was enraged.** He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, **‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”**

This parable occurs in Luke's Gospel and in the Gospel of Thomas, a non-canonical Gospel, with one major difference: violence plays no role in their telling. The violence is vivid in Matthew.

Now, at the start of Matthew's telling of the parable, there's the phrase, "The kingdom of the heaven has been likened to..." which is not the same as the kingdom of heaven *is like* a pearl of great value or the kingdom of heaven *is like* a treasure hidden in a field. This parable begins with the kingdom of heaven *has been likened to...* I take this as a set-up for a **wrong** way of thinking about God's reign, a wrong way of thinking that needs correction. (See this [blog](#).) This parable describes not God's reign but its opposite: the all-too-familiar reign of violent and insecure rulers and nations.

Behind this parable is the very real King Herod, a puppet king put into power by Rome. Herod is an insecure ruler. So think of the wedding not as a social event as much as a political one. To decline the invitation is to rebel against the ruler. The first folks invited we presume would be the landed gentry of the time; the wealthy, the politically powerful. And that's where the cycle of violence begins. They mistreat and kill the king's slaves. And the king responds by killing them and burning the whole city. Then it seems like the king's slaves force others to come just to fill the banquet hall. And, then the king's rage is focused on one person, a man in the banquet hall not wearing a wedding robe. And the king orders that one bound hand and foot and thrown into the utter darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The parable of the violent king is the blue rooster; it draws attention to imperial violence, violence meted out by empire, the kind that nations and kings and presidents and prime ministers use in vengeance, in retaliation, in conquest. Violence in physical form and in speech: weapons of mass destruction, torture, hate rhetoric, threatening speech, "stand by Proud Boys."

And, the blue rooster stands in stark contrast to God's reign, the reign that constituted the core of Jesus' preaching and teaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." **God's reign works differently than the king in this parable and empire in general.** Jesus stands by God's rule of compassion and vulnerability.

Keep in mind what Jesus said in Matthew 20 when he teaches the disciples about leadership in the reign of God:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Jesus defines leadership not by the show of force but by service, not by killing others or hurting others or castigating others, but by sacrificing for others, for caring for others.

Maybe Jesus is the man at the banquet not wearing the wedding robe. Instead of armed rebellion, Jesus leads a revolt of passive resistance that stands up to the violent expression of power over others not with weapons but with resolve and dignity. And he is bound hand and foot because of that resistance.

Jesus offers God's reign as an alternative to the violence that rules our collective lives. In God's reign, we place our violence, our insecurities, our vengeance, our aggression, our grief, our death onto Jesus, onto the cross. There God will transform it into compassion, into understanding, into peace, into love, into life. By seeing the blue rooster, by considering this violent, insecure king, we see the reign of God in its everyday way: its way of non-violence, secure in love.