

In Florida, summers seems to last forever. Six to seven months of hot, humid weather each year takes a toll on most of us - wearing us down and draining us of energy. It's no wonder that many of us travel to the mountains during this most oppressive and long summer season.

On occasion, I've escaped the Florida summertime heat and headed to the mountains where I've hiked and enjoyed cooler weather. I walked trails on Mt. Ranier in Washington State as well as Mt. Mitchell in North Carolina. I've had the pleasure of following along and swimming in mountain lakes and standing under waterfalls. Those experiences have refreshed my spirit and given me new energy – before I headed back to the sweltering heat and humidity here at home.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah addresses people who know what its like to live in an oppressively hot climate. While some might claim, "it's a dry heat," 100-plus degree temperatures are a challenge to any person in any location. Isaiah addresses a nation that has been oppressed and driven from their native land. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Isaiah proclaims that this has happened because the people strayed from their faith. In the Lord's name he prophesies that when they turn back to God, a certain order and peace will settle upon their lives and bring them to their homeland. The image Isaiah uses to convey that message is that of a feast – a feast of delicious food and abundant wine all served up on the cool and peaceful environs of a mountainside.

Spoiler alert. The people do repent. They are able to return to their native land. And that homecoming can be likened to the most satisfying meal one has ever had and takes place in the most beautiful setting imaginable.

Jesus would certainly be familiar with this passage from Isaiah. He understood that it represented what the Kingdom of his Father is like. As a result, Jesus uses similar imagery when he preached about the Kingdom of God.

In today's gospel, Jesus equates the Kingdom with a wedding feast given by a king. A king would never skimp on the food, wine, setting, and surroundings for a reception he would give for his son who is marrying. This wedding would be the feast of a lifetime. The presumption is that no one would ever skip an event like this. But those who should know better do skip it. It is the ultimate social faux pas and the deepest of insults made to the king.

The story continues with the king inviting those outside of his social and economic circle to the wedding. In Jesus' day, that would never happen. But Jesus is making a point. He's saying that not just a select few are invited into his Kingdom. But all people are invited – the poor, the lame, the homeless, the tax collector, the prostitute, the serial and serious sinner, and everyone else we might imagine unworthy to set foot in the Kingdom of God.

At some point and time we probably imagine ourselves enjoying the blessings of the Kingdom of Heaven – represented in the imagery of a fine meal, exquisite and abundant wine, a social

gathering where everyone gets along, and a celebration that lasts longer than we could have ever dreamed of. As we envision ourselves luxuriating in such a setting, we probably also picture those folks who we think should not be a part of that celebration. Maybe we imagine that because they're not from our church, country, political party, race, or social class. Maybe we think they should be excluded because of their sketchy moral status or because we feel they are insincere when it comes to repenting from their sin. In our minds at least, we declare that they have no place, no right to God's Kingdom.

We might see it that way. But that's not how God sees it.

There's another detail in the gospel parable that deserves our attention. While a poor man is invited to the wedding feast, he eventually is thrown out because he was not wearing the proper wedding garment. Theologians have explained that the wedding attire referred to represents the garment one receives at baptism. Those theologians contend that the man was dismissed from the feast because he wasn't baptized. While there is a level of truth to that interpretation, I think there is an additional way to look at this detail. It is presumed that the king provided everything for his guests – including the proper attire for such a feast. But the man in question wasn't concerned about that detail. He was careless and callous to the gift that the king had offered to him.

To that end and for us today Jesus is calling attention to how careless or callous we might be as we attempt to live out the faith. Do we approach our prayer, the celebration of the sacraments and the Mass with indifference and casualness? Such

an approach to the celebrations that Christ invites us to makes us unworthy to share in his Kingdom.

The first reading and the gospel we hear today at Mass remind us of the beauty and blessedness of God's Kingdom. We are reminded that we are invited to participate in the great heavenly feast. We are also reminded of how all of God's people are invited to that same feast, despite what we think of them or what we imagine their state in life to be.

About fifteen years ago, I traveled to a parish in Haiti which we had a twinning relationship with. That parish sits at about 2500 feet above sea level. One morning, I accompanied the pastor of that parish to a chapel and school he looked after which were a part of his parish. To get to that school we walked down the mountainside. It was mid-June and it was hot and humid. The trip down the mountain was fairly easy. The visit was a wonderful and heart-warming experience. The trip back up the mountain to our home base was altogether something different. I ran out of water on that hike back up the mountain. I became dehydrated and then started to experience heat exhaustion. I couldn't walk. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. And I think that pastor was similarly worried. Out of the blue, a young child brought me a plastic container of water. I couldn't drink it because I knew that if I did I would get sick. So I poured it over my head. That made me feel better. A few minutes after that a man brought his mule down to me, put me on the mule, and walked with us for the next two hours back to the parish.

I was an outsider in a strange land. More than a few people were probably suspicious of me and perhaps even questioned the

motives of our group for being in their community which sat on top of the mountain. Ultimately though, their concern, their generosity, their sharing of the little they had with me made it seem like heaven. I even returned to a great feast at the parish house. They cooked all they had for our dinner that night – a sumptuous feast of noodles topped with those little canned cocktail hotdogs.

What a feast. What a celebration. What a little taste of heaven on that mountaintop. I was not worthy of their kindness. But I was blessed with the abundance they had and all the kindness they could offer.

That is how God treats us. In our direst of circumstances he shares with us everything that we need. We certainly do not deserve it. But he gives it to us anyway. God reminds us to do the same for others. While we may not see some others as worthy, God sees them as worthy. And that is reason enough to include all people – friends and foes alike – in this feast of plenty and this celebration of hope, here on earth and at the banquet we seek to enjoy forever in heaven.

Amen? Amen!