

Bruton Parish Church
August 29, 2010
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
A Dangerous Supper in the Kingdom of God
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson

Blessed be the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

“¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’” (Luke 14: 12-14)

Most of you know that my life prior to priesthood was primarily that of a Naval Officer, followed by a few years in the corporate world. One of the many things those two experiences had in common was the attendance of countless and seemingly endless meetings. We met for any number of reasons and just as often, for what seemed to be no reason at all. We met to set priorities, to organize, to develop strategy, and to plan the next meeting. We even met to discuss why there were so many meetings. Regardless of the reason, one thing that was always notable was that when you entered any conference or board room there was a clear hierarchy and it was known to all except the most inexperienced, a place at the table meant power and influence and the particular places at the table delineated the relative chain of command for the meeting. A place along the wall meant support and advisory roles. Truly, perhaps sadly, careers could be made or broken by the influence wielded in these meetings.

This is a great modern example of what Jesus describes in this parable when he observes how they choose seats at the banquet table saying to them,

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Lk 14:7-11)

But this parable is not merely offering a lesson in the etiquette of self-promotion. It begins a teaching about life in the Kingdom of God. If self-promotion were the goal, then Jesus' advice would likely be disastrous. Instead of self-promotion and gain, Luke has Jesus here, as he does throughout his Gospel, offering the direct

opposition of correct behavior for those seeking the Kingdom of God with that of those who are merely involved in pursuits of the familiar world.

It is also obvious in the Gospel of Luke that living by these contradictory and strange rules is a dangerous enterprise. Remember, that as we follow this part of the Gospel, we are on the road with Jesus as he travels to Jerusalem and to execution by crucifixion - the Roman death reserved for “rebels,” “criminals” and those who threatened the “stable order.”¹ Jesus’ conclusion that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” provides the backdrop for the direct and dangerous challenge that Jesus makes to the Pharisaic leader who is his host.

In Luke, meals play a prominent role and are often used to illustrate the Kingdom of God. On two previous occasions, Jesus had dined with a Pharisee by invitation (Luke 7:36; 11:37). He was accused of being one who ate and drank to excess (Luke 7:34). Jesus arranged the miraculous feeding of a hungry crowd (Luke 9: 12-17). Jesus gave us the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the wine and the bread and was recognized by the Emmaus travelers in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35).

Now here with this Pharisee, while sitting at his table, Jesus challenges the leader’s motives for holding the banquet and for inviting the prominent family and friends that he does. He suggests that Kingdom behavior calls instead for the invitation and inclusion of those that need the most and can provide nothing in return. Jesus sits down for a very dangerous supper. By challenging a prominent citizen to favor the powerless outcast over the distinguished and the powerful that can reciprocate his favor, Jesus places himself once again at the fringe of society’s norms. The people that Jesus suggests for inclusion are totally unacceptable for the exalted banquet event. To invite these marginalized and unclean outcasts is to turn that world upside down. To turn the world upside down is risky and dangerous and it seems to be that for which Jesus is constantly calling.

Now whether it is the world of Luke or our own, there are always identified outcasts - those that reside beyond what is socially or aesthetically acceptable. There are countless markers picked to isolate people and render them powerless, denying them a place at the table. The markers might be social, economic, educational, racial, cultural, sexual identity-based, or ethnic. They might be centered on actions that are illegal or sinful, real or perceived. Jesus suggests to the Pharisee that a dangerous supper with outcasts is preferable to the safe and comfortable supper that will ensure a return of the same, that will protect the status quo.

The implications of Jesus words here are much farther-reaching than who sits down to a meal. This is not about a “dinner party.” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus goes as far as to identify the outcasts as his very presence amongst us.

¹ Leech, Kenneth. *We Preach Christ Crucified: The Proclamation of the Cross in a Dark Age*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994. 50.

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25: 35-40)

So, once again it is clear that this Kingdom of God that is the “heart of Jesus’ preaching” is not something that waits for us somewhere in the sweet by and by.² It is a Kingdom not of this world because it defies the conventions of this world and it challenges us to be proclaiming members of its dangerous ways - to make it known. It is a kingdom, of which Luke will later record Jesus saying when pressed by the Pharisees, these words:

"The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, 'look, here it is!' or 'there it is!' for, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17: 20-21).

It is not just something that dwells within the individual heart of me or you. A little personal Jesus that we take out and use to reinforce our own conclusions and to make us feel comfortable. It is that which we build together in community. In a community, that welcomes all who need to sup but cannot offer supper in return.

In their wonderful book, *Mighty Stories-Dangerous Rituals*, Lutheran Pastor Herbert Anderson and Roman Priest Edward Foley observe that the Eucharist that we will all take together in a few moments is our most “dangerous ritual” because it represents the entirety of the whole ministry of Christ and is the Christian’s “mighty story.” The dangerous supper table that Jesus sets for us confronts norms, embraces adversaries, “honors the outcast,” and fulfills the Kingdom of God.³ It is this, our central gathering place that challenges us to the danger of living for the other, of seeing Christ in them and being Christ for them.

Our former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold once described our liturgy as “dangerous” when he wrote that our worship is much more than “ritual pattern.” “When we worship,” he writes, “...we are participating in the very life of Christ. And at the heart of Christ’s life lies the Paschal pattern of death and resurrection: multiple dyings and risings, losings and findings, whereby we are shaped and formed and conformed to the image of the one whose name we bear.” The bishop

² Leech, Kenneth. *We Preach Christ Crucified: The Proclamation of the Cross in a Dark Age*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994. 58.

³ Anderson, Herbert and Edward Foley. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bash, 1998. 154-155.

invites us not to shield ourselves from the danger by “limiting our participation” but to “(celebrate) with fear and trembling and with open and expectant hearts.”⁴

So, now we are invited to come to this table expecting the renewal that God has for us and to take it forth to find places in our lives where we can sit down to a dangerous supper in the Kingdom of God”

Blessed be the name of God.

⁴ The Most Reverend Frank Griswold. *Encountering Christ: The mystery of our worship shapes our faith communities. Upon Reflection*. Episcopal Life, September 2004. Volume 15 Number 8.