

A Meet to Eat With Jesus

Luke 14:1: 7-14

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 28, 2106

According to Luke, Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of an unnamed Pharisee who also invited his friends. Unfortunately for them, Jesus turned out to be a somewhat disagreeable guest. He didn't argue with his host, or insult the other guests at the table but in his own understated yet assertive way, he pointed out their shortcomings as religious leaders.

Today, a lot of people say they want nothing to do with the leaders and followers of organized religion. They're in good company. Jesus had problems with organized religion too.

Last Sunday, I said whenever you see the word "world" in John's gospel, it meant human society organizing itself outside of, and often in opposition to, God's will. Being a human run institution, this also happens in the Church much too often.

From a humanistic point of view, organized religion has played an important role in society, providing stability, structure and legitimacy. Ben Franklin, a confirmed Deist, supported and attended church services regularly, even though he rejected the primary doctrines of Christianity. Today, many people may or may not believe in the doctrines of Christianity but they do agree that organized religion has run its course and outlasted its purpose.

As members and supporters of organized religion, we need to heed these voices but only within the context of Jesus' insightful critiques of the organized religion of his time.

Mixing worldly beliefs and traditions with bible based doctrines has always led to a bad end. The blending tends to mutate the faith into something it shouldn't be. Too often, too many religious leaders have used made up rules and regulations as sticks without a carrot to keep church members in line. ("Take a care," they warned, "there's no salvation, except through us!")

What's more, there always has been and always will be religious leaders setting boundaries separating their congregations from outcasts and sinners. These artificial boundaries give religious people a sense of entitlement that leads to self-righteousness that leads to prejudice and probably worst of all, the loss of their loss of humanity.

The biblical narrative and church history bear this out. Like every other human run institution you can imagine, organized religion is prey to hijackers who aim to gain and keep power and keep the outcasts out. That's why it's necessary to contrast Jesus' way with the

Pharisees' way of doing things. Jesus recognized their rigid ways were nothing more than off putting stop gaps, designed to keep their religious practices from being questioned and undermined.

If we're not careful, we can repeat this error and fall into the same trap.

Jesus intentionally acted like a disagreeable guest because just prior to this meal, he was confronted by another group of Pharisees for healing a man on the Sabbath. According to their religious laws healings could be done on any day of the week except the seventh day.

Knowing the news of his rule breaking preceded him, Jesus didn't ignore the 600-pound gorilla in the room. Instead, he started the conversation with a parable.

"When you are invited... to a wedding banquet, do not sit in the place of honor in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited... the host... may come to you and say, 'give this person your place' and then in disgrace you... must take the lowest place. Instead sit down at the lowest place so... your host... may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher;' then you will be honored... for those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 14:7-11)

He followed up by saying, "When you give... a dinner, do not invite your friends or families or rich neighbors... but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, and the blind... you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid as the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14: 12-14)

One of the Pharisees gushed out, "Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

Knowing he still wasn't getting through to his them, Jesus told still another parable, this one about a rich man who gave a great dinner and invited his friends, only no one showed up. When he sent his servants out to inquire why they were absent, each gave a lame excuse. Frustrated and angry, the rich man sent out his servants to bring in the poor, the cripple, the blind, and the lame. Jesus concluded his parable by saying, "for I tell you, none of those invited will taste my dinner in the kingdom." (Luke 14:24)

This parable was a warning. These Pharisees wouldn't be invited to feast in the kingdom. Why? They ignored the greatest commandment. You can never love God if you don't love your neighbor and yourself. You can't love your neighbors if you exclude them. You can't love yourself until you face yourself and come clean.

The apostle Paul, formally the most zealous of Pharisees, came to that moment of truth when he realized he loved his rituals and traditions more than he loved God, his neighbor and himself. In his letter to the Philippians he confessed, "... whatever gains I had (by being religious) I now regard as loss... and...rubbish so I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:7-8)

That evening, Jesus diagnosed one of the fundamental flaws of organized religion: that sense of entitlement that starts at the top with the religious leaders and filters down to their followers.

First and foremost, these parables instruct religious people to nurture a genuine modesty that comes from a humble spirit.

Real humility is probably the most allusive of all the good character traits. Only someone vain and obtuse would ever assert, "I am a humble person." Once you make that claim you expose your pride.

Humility isn't something to be proud about. You either have it or you don't, depending on the circumstances. You can be genuinely humbled if someone pays you a compliment one minute but as proud as a peacock if someone else pays you another in the next.

Authentic humble people can only come by it supernaturally. By the grace of God, they've become comfortable enough in their own skins because they realize they're one of God's beloved children. It's not the richest or smartest person in the room, only those overwhelmed by knowing God always loves them, warts and all are candidates for true humility. In turn, that humility frees them to love and accept themselves, as well as the unfortunates lacking their breeding and social standing.

I think this is true: once you realize you don't need to prove yourself to God, there's no reason to prove yourself to others. What's more, you realize other people don't have to prove themselves to you. Otherwise we'd all end up trying to prove we're someone we're not! Life's too short to get tangled up in that mess.

Coming to this realization doesn't come from walking lock step with organized religion but it does come from being obedient to Christ's law of love which makes you more fully alive and human than any religious tradition or ritual ever could.

Don't get me wrong, traditions and rituals play an essential role in our Christian faith. Without them we couldn't be connected to our past and reminded of the promises and covenants God made with Abraham, Moses and finally Jesus, guaranteeing our identity as God's children and Jesus' brothers and sisters.

You see, traditions and rituals are only the means to a greater end. Jesus doesn't care how religious you are. He does care how you treat other people. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "Whatever you do to the least of these you do it to me," is the ethic of Christ.

Self righteous people don't get it because they're content to be right with themselves and people just like them. Only the truly "righteous," are right with God because they humble

themselves before Christ who accepts people you may think are not like you even though you're more like them than you think.

We may not like it, but if other people know you and I are a Christian and we belong to this church they will watch you closely to see if what you do and what you say are in keeping with what we believe. The Pharisees turned the common people off because of their pride and exclusiveness. One of the reasons Jesus came into the world was to correct our wrong-headed attitudes and behaviors so people will say about us, "see how they love one another."

This summer, under the radar, the New Beginnings team has been working tirelessly to connect with people in our neighborhood. Remember, we're not doing this for Babcock Church but for Christ and His kingdom. We believe the Holy Spirit is helping us bring people together and enhance the quality of our lives through friendship based on servanthood.

There are people out there isolated and afraid with problems we can only imagine. I said this just a few weeks ago, the church is not a hiding place from the world. We are the Body of Christ, called to be in the world but not of it. That means breaking down barriers and building relationships so we can prepare each other so we won't miss the kingdom of God coming near.

That's why Jesus spent three years of his life preaching the gospel and that's why Jesus gave his life for us and our salvation.

We are the keepers of this good news. God forbid we keep it to ourselves.