

THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Luke 14:1; 7-14

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, September 1, 2013

The Man Who Came to Dinner is a George S. Kaufman/Moss Hart play about a small Ohio town hosting the famous radio personality Sheridan Whiteside. At the insistence of the richest man in town's pesky wife, Whiteside was invited to dinner at the home of long-suffering Ernest Stanley several days before Christmas. Unfortunately for Stanley, Whiteside slipped on a patch of ice on his front steps and broke his hip. Whiteside threatened to sue unless he could stay at Stanley's home until he healed. The man who came to dinner, and never left, turned out to be a disagreeable house guest who quickly wore out his welcome.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is also the man who came to dinner, this time at the home of the richest man in town, an unnamed leader of the Pharisees who invited his associates to meet and eat with Jesus. Unfortunately for them, Jesus turned out to be a disagreeable guest who argued with the host, insulted the other guests and ended up rebuking them all for excluding from their table anyone who lacked the breeding and social standing of their circle of friends. But unlike Sheridan Whiteside, Jesus didn't wear out his welcome because he quickly left to keep company with the outcast and sinners the religious people rejected.

Last Sunday's sermon attempted to draw the distinction between organized religion and the biblical faith preached by the prophets in the Old Testament and personified in the life and ministry of Jesus in the New Testament. This Sunday we continue to see the discrepancy in the story of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees over dinner.

From a human point of view, the primary role of religion in society is to provide stability, structure and legitimacy. But when the religious establishment embraces this one dimensional vision that religion becomes man-made instead of heaven sent. Both the biblical and historical record shows man-made beliefs and practices make religion self-serving and exclusive because they inevitably become weapons to keep people in line and dependant on the religious establishment. ("There's no salvation except through us") What's more religion sets boundaries, separating the "cool kids" from the "geeks," or the respectable religious people from the outcasts and sinners. All this gives the members of organized religion a sense of entitlement that leads to self-righteousness that leads to prejudice, injustice and probably the worst of all, the loss of humanity and the way to God.

So the Bible and Church history shows this to be true, religion has been used time and again to keep and maintain power, gather and secure wealth, keep outcasts in poverty and even slavery and finally, to wage war. In the name of religion, innocent people have

been slaughtered if only because they were members of another ethnic group or practiced a different faith.

Of course these things just mentioned are the worse excesses of organized religion not the normal everyday outcomes of practicing a belief system tainted by man-made traditions and laws. But as we know, it was in order to defend their religion that the Pharisees, Temple Scholars and Priests conspired to crucify Jesus and be done with him once and for all. Think about that, Jesus was crucified in the name of religion to protect religion from God. How ironic is that?

Having said that, it's important we know the reason why Jesus was turned off enough to be such a disagreeable guest that night he came to dinner. Just before this Sabbath dinner Jesus healed a man, which according to the Pharisees could've been done on any of the other six days of the week. By their look and manner Jesus sensed disapproval for his act of compassion. So not ignoring the six hundred pound gorilla in the room, Jesus started the dinner conversation head on. But instead of defending his unlawful healing on the Sabbath (Jesus was probably sick and tired defending himself), he went on the offensive, exposing their lack of humility and craving for privilege.

Then as now, people have a need to be respected and honored, if not singled out for prominence and privilege, by others. Before the dinner Jesus couldn't help notice the guests scrambling for the best seats at the table, in order to sit next to the more important and powerful guests if only to be seen talking with them. Emily Post, who set the tone for good manners in the last century, would call these needy people vulgarians. Jesus would simply call them hypocrites.

“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...and the host...may come to you and say, ‘give this person your place’ and then in disgrace you...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)

Jesus' teaching wasn't just a good tip about good manners. More than that, Jesus was speaking to the need for humbling yourself, not as a clever strategy to enhance your reputation, but with genuine modesty that only comes from a truly humble spirit.

Real humility is probably the most elusive of all the character traits. Only an obtuse, vain man would claim, “I am a humble person,” because once you claim to be humble you unintentionally expose your pride. Humility isn't something you work for, you either have it or you don't, depending on the circumstance. For instance 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 the next. But a genuinely humble person is comfortable enough in his own skin that he's learned to base his self-worth not on any great achievements but by being a child of God, not the richest or smartest person in the room, but someone who knows deep down that since God loves and accepts you, you are free to love and accept not only yourself but others as well. What's more since there's no

need to prove your worth to God, there's no reason you have to prove yourself to others and they don't have to prove themselves to you by pretending you're all someone you're not!

This brand of self-revelation rarely comes from walking lock step with organized religion, but it does come from being in honest relationships with God, your neighbor and yourself. Commitment and obedience to Christ's law of love does more to make you fully alive and human than any religious law and ritual ever could. Don't get me wrong, religious traditions and rituals play an important role in our Christian faith. Without them we wouldn't be connected to our past and reminded of our inheritance, those promises and covenants God made with Abraham, Moses and finally Jesus, that guarantee our identity as God's people.

All the more reason for the need to know the difference between a religion based on accomplishments and our faith in the Crucified Christ. Only those who come to realize there's nothing left to do but humble themselves at the foot of the cross can see that rituals and traditions, apart from God's love and grace, are worthless. The Apostle Paul said as much. After reminding his readers he was once a Pharisee, a zealously religious man, he confessed, "Yet whatever gains I had (by being "religious") these I now regard as loss...and regard them as rubbish so I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:7-8) (Actually, in the original Greek the word wasn't rubbish but dung.)

Anyway, getting back to Luke's story of Jesus breaking bread with the Pharisee, I think the point Jesus was making is this: God doesn't care how "religious" you are, he does care about how you treat other people, you know, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Self-righteous people don't get it as long as they're only "right" with themselves and people just like them. At the same time, only the "righteous," are "right" with God because they are blessed with the humble heart that allows Christ-like love and acceptance of people not like you, "the poor, the blind, the crippled and lame." Maybe they can never pay you back even so, Jesus said, "But you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

"Ah ha" exclaims the skeptic, so there is a reward, maybe not now, but you expect something in return, that's your religion, "be good and you'll get into heaven."

Sounds like a strong "gotcha" argument, but it falls apart because when you do humble yourself at the foot of the cross and you're stripped bare of any pretensions, you come to the startling realization that nothing you could on your own ever do to "earn" your salvation, so if there are times you expend yourself by inviting someone into your life who can never pay you back, it's not seen by you as payback, but instead a heartfelt expression of gratitude for what God through Christ has done for you. No "quid pro quo" (this for that) but Christ living through you as you trust God and obey his will for your life.

One more thing. Last Sunday after drawing the distinction between organized religion and Christian discipleship, I also said that we're at the very beginning of another cyclical five hundred year pattern that can be traced back to 586 B.C. History shows that every 500 years since then, the people of God have experienced cataclysmic shifts in

faith and practice, the last being the Great Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther in 1519.

Now, 500 years later we can see how the Church is at the very beginning of still another transition. We're realizing, almost too late, that the old ways of being the Church are no longer effective. Many people think the Church is irrelevant, self-serving and prejudiced. Some of these charges are unfair, some are spot on even so, organized religion, as we know it, at least in the West, is fading.

But that doesn't mean Christianity is dying or that Christ is irrelevant. God is up to something and most of us will probably be long gone before things settle down and the new way is firmly in place for at least for the next 500 years if the Second Coming doesn't come first.

So what's our generation's responsibility as we see declining interest in "church" as we know it? Certainly not to put our beliefs and practices on life support expecting people to come back to church just because we put up a welcome sign out front. No, we need to follow the example of the early Christians in that second great 500 year shift recorded in the Book of Acts: be in intense prayer and then wait for the Spirit's leading us to be Christ-like, fierce servants and friends of our neighbor wherever we find ourselves, in our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and social groups, by expressing our heartfelt gratitude for Christ sacrificing himself so we in turn can sacrifice ourselves by being faithful and obedient, kind and generous.

You may also recall, if you were here last Sunday, that I said I think our generation of Christians' job, during this time of unstable transition, is to "hold the fort," keep Christ at the center of our life together in Christian community and strive to be a faithful witness of the Gospel by involving ourselves and resources in the lives of our neighbors.

After worship several of you came up and said the sermon spoke to them, but also wondered if "holding the fort" was not the best metaphor, sounding too much like the old battle cry, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!"

So what might be a better slogan than "Hold the Fort?" Maybe "Keep the Faith" or "Trust and Obey?"

Your suggestions are requested and the winner of the best slogan will be given an all-expense paid round trip visit to the Shot Tower in beautiful downtown Baltimore.

In the meantime, consider forming a new Bible study/prayer group with your friends, then meditate on the Scriptures, be in prayer and wait for the man who came to dinner to say something important to us that will help change our lives and the life of His Church.

Let's now prepare ourselves to remember Jesus around his table.