

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Text on Sunday, November 1, 2009

Luke 14: 12-24

Today—November 1—they call All Saints Day. It's the day that Halloween is "een" to, the evening of All Hallows. It's the Christian day of remembrance for the dead—a fitting theme for the first day of a new ministry. On this Lord's Day, let our mind rest not only in our Lord who brings us here, but in all through whom the Spirit has sent God's waking word. For life and death are of supreme importance. This is a day tradition has set aside to be about life and death. It's about time.

So is my sojourn with you, beginning today. They call this an interim ministry; you know all about it now through the good work of Rev. Cari Jackson. It's ministry "in the meantime." It's about time, too—about different seasons in the the love of truth. I will serve with you for a short time—a year, more or less. It might seem sensible to hold back, not get too involved with heart and mind and will, to not put down roots so as to not have roots to pull up. But I invite you further in and further up the way of Christ.

The Christian thing of giving it up for others, of not trying to save yourself or your place or your pride or your feelings or a few of your favorite things, but letting it all go in favor of someone you see who needs help or love or community—this Christian thing is not unique to Christianity. Jesus would be the first to deny it. The Jew and the Buddhist and the Muslim also aim there, if "there" means learning to master our impulses, our neediness, and the thoughts that run us, so that we are less the animal of stimulus-and-response, instead becoming a human, more and more, more able to choose the ground for our thought and feeling and action. More free to serve than to be served. This is the Christian thing—and the others' too—but you're here. You're walking this way, the way of the Cross.

Jesus is teaching this path at a relaxing dinner in a comfortable home. There, he says "To a dinner at your house, don't invite your friends and rich relations; No! Invite the poor, the lame, and the blind." Jesus' concern, for the moment, is not to solve the problem of the loneliness and powerlessness and despair of the disabled whom society never sees. No, for the moment, Jesus is offering his listeners a way—a practice, something to do—to work out their own inner development—their own salvation, as the apostle Paul calls it. The strange guest list is a way to become aware within oneself how fearful we are of our own weakness—the sickness, the powerlessness, the emotional confusion and softness of mind, that are in us or coming upon us, as they have come upon all the saints. We hate this. Jesus is teaching that our nice personality and clean smelling clothes and well-behaved friends are partly a defense we put up to keep ourselves from feeling our ego's insignificance. And that defense, that fear, is the direct cause of all injustice and violence.

So do this, he says: Invite a poor man in here. Invite a severely disabled person in here. Don't send money to a non-profit that serves the population. Well okay, do!—but not *just* that. Don't just feed them from behind a safe wall of distinction. Bring them home. For their sake, yes—but even more, for yours. So that you can find out how you are wired for self-protection, and, with the help of your soul's friends, can continue dismantling the stones of your castled defenses and become a human, freely ready to live and to die.

Jesus is teaching this most precious possibility when one of the dinner guests interrupts him to change the subject. "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" the man burps out. Now, it sounds holy and reverent, but Jesus isn't buying it. You see, Pharisees of that time believed in life after death, while a stronger group called the Sadducees emphatically rejected the idea. The dispute was not just speculation, but added to a power struggle between parties too. So this guest is pleased to be putting Jesus onto his party's platform. (That never happens, right?) What a sly effort to blunt the

cutting edge of Jesus' teaching. But turning your religion into a prop for your politics is just what Jesus is aiming to undermine. So a serious spiritual error is erupting in this man as he tries to get Jesus away from this work of dismantling our walls and channel him back into ordinary religious talk, whose old formulas help make us feel that we really are holding it all together.

Troubled for his listener's crusted confusion, Jesus uses much rougher sandpaper now. He probes for the spiritual disease with another story. A master invites everyone to the ultimate feast, the one for all the saints—where all are to be seated, not one missing; all the cripples, all the poor, all the children enslaved to the trades of greed and sex, all the elderly, all the mentally ill, all God's children—and you. You are invited to come simple, Jesus says, without the fancy dress of the protected personality—and you say *No! I haven't time*. Do you know the refrain of the little song: ♪ ♪ ♪ I cannot come to the banquet, don't bother me now? . . . One has bought land, another cattle, and another has just married. Please accept my regrets. Got land? That's security and protection against strangers and false promises. Got cows? That's income security for today's meal and roof. That's "I just got a job." (I know how that feels.) Got married? At bottom, that's children and grandchildren—the ramp onto the highway of history, security against oblivion. Wow!

Jesus offers a profound social, psychological, and spiritual analysis of our disease. In our struggle to manage our fears about our insignificance against the tides of time and loss, we have readily accepted two of God's covenant promises to Abraham—secure land to live on and many children to carry us forward—but we readily abandon, just as Israel so often did, the third covenant promise, that we become a blessing to all families of the earth. We let ourself become a machine of busy-ness which cannot and will not take time to live into the precious, risky, naked, defenseless reality of the uniquely human gift, to become a Self in the presence of the One.

Jacob Needleman tells the story of walking with a Tibetan scholar on the streets of San Francisco. They were discussing a startling Tibetan allegory for how rare it is to become truly human. *But then why are there so many humans?* Needleman asked. *How many humans do you see?* the Tibetan asked, surveying the fast-moving crowd.

"In a flash," writes Needleman, "I understood the [allegory]. Most of the people I was seeing, *in the inner state they were in at that moment*, were not really people at all. They were not really *there*. They were busy, they were *in a hurry*. They—like all of us—were obsessed with doing things right away. But *right away* is the opposite of *now*—the opposite of the lived present moment in which the passing of time no longer tyrannizes us." (*Time and the Soul*, p. 10)

"Right away," we might say, is the opposite of coming to the feast, when the Master's servant says, "Now come, for all is made ready." It's about time. In the words of the Buddhist evening gatha—

Let me respectfully remind you,
Life and Death are of supreme importance.
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.
Each of us should strive to awaken.
Awaken! Take heed!
Do not squander your lives.

All we do here—all of what a Christian church is for—is about time. It is about learning and practicing a different way in time than that by which the world winds your watch—which is the way of domination, the way of death. The different way is the way of relinquishment, the way of the Cross. You already reveal that way here at First Church in so many ways: in this people of many colors, many ages; in the musics; in the participation of young and old, male and female, gay and lesbian and straight. Yes, you already show up as a parable of the kingdom of God—not some impossibly distant future thing,

but now, the eternal now, where time and its awesome sweeping scythe cannot dominate.

Are we there yet? Those are the first words of the final paragraph of First Church's entry into the Presbyterian denomination's MultiCultural Church Story contest, submitted just yesterday. "Are we there yet? No, we need to broaden . . ." is how this beautiful essay continues. Well indeed, no church is ever "there," for in the gift of God, our eye is continually being opened to see who is *not* here—the blind, the poor, the crushed—and to see the walls within ourselves that have blocked their entry here.

I seek to work with you for the interim like that. I invite you to hard work, but not worried work and not busy work. Churches tend to press a lot on the duty of your presence. May such pressure give way to the *beauty of your presence* through the practice of inviting strangers in our midst. May we, with fear and defenses calmed, open ourselves more freely to judge what we do that is not fit for the feast, and to receive the divine power of new beginning—passionate for the parable of the kingdom that we are becoming, yet ready with all the saints at the right time to give up what must be relinquished for the Body. I promise you that.

It's about time.

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