

Proper 19 Year C

“And the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling and saying, this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

For the last several weeks there has been a man hanging out at All Saints off and on...another “down on his luck” story...Katharine met him first...He asked if we had any work around here...He is polite and well spoken...intelligent but uneducated...Katharine hired him to work on one of her jobs...and we’ve also paid him to do some yard work around the church...His name is George. He told us that he was mostly homeless...It seems his former girlfriend, the mother of his young son...has thrown him out and invited the new boyfriend to live with her...each day we gave him a ride home...each day home was in a different place...St. Stephens road one day...Campground, the next, very near to All Saints, but worlds apart...an old weather-worn and derelict house with a sandy back yard with idle men in shoulder-less tee shirts playing dominoes and drinking beer at nine in the morning...they play most every day George said...now George talks a lot...He has told us much about his life...his mother died when he was fourteen...he’s made some bad mistakes he says... “but God’s gonna straighten all that out,” he says...I’m pretty sure he’s got substance issues as well...a doubtful reputation...but a good heart and a decided joie de vivre, in spite of being a lost soul...a lost soul among many lost souls in our town... in or world.

A couple of weeks ago he was helping Katharine haul limbs to the street...I was working on my sermon...and Katharine walked through the office and said George had worked hard...and that she was going home to get some eggs and bacon and toast...and would I like to join them for breakfast in Stirling Hall...I did...George asked if he could say the blessing...yes of course, we said...He had the three of us join hands...and he began to pray... “O God, we give you thanks for our lying down and our getting up...thank you for these people you have put in my life...and all the many blessings you bestow upon us...bless this food to our use and us to your service...amen.”

We ate and talked...and at the end of the meal George thanked us again...and said... “I feel like a champion today.” A champion... So I saw it again...the transforming reality of table fellowship...the glow of human community, there at a kitchen table. He went on his way, back into the lostness of his world.....

“There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole...there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

Our Gospel reading for this morning continues in the context of a meal...for the last several weeks in our Gospel readings Jesus has been at a meal with the Jewish establishment, the scribes and Pharisees, debating issues of social etiquette and ritual purity. You remember a couple of readings ago Jesus told his hosts that when invited to a banquet to not claim the highest place of honor...but to sit at the least honorable place...and if you get invited up then so be it...but to always first be deferential to the other guests...this was of course contrary to the normal customs regarding meals in a culture that held in high esteem hierarchy and honor....So here at this banquet Luke is again challenging the social order...and earlier in this Gospel Luke speaks of the callous rich being sent away empty...and the poor filled with good things...this is revolutionary stuff this audience is hearing...and if to mess with the seating arrangements at banquets wasn't enough to raise eyebrows of the establishment, then Jesus says guess who else gets invited...he invites the riff raff...sinners and tax collectors...those of doubtful reputation...those not of us...those on the outside...those who are lost....we'll hear later in Luke about the steward of a wealthy householder sent into the streets to invite the crippled and the lame...all the unclean...Luke is challenging the culture then and now...challenging the insidious cultivated sense of superiority...No one is superior he says...all of us brothers...all of us sisters....

This Gospel, and I mean the entirety of Luke, is a story of restoration, of reclamation...a story about our God who seeks passionately...and in this story, God seeks obsessively compulsively (leaving the ninety nine to find the one; or turning the house upside down to find a small coin) That ought to affirm all of you OCD types... Jesus asks his hosts who wouldn't go and do that...who wouldn't leave the ninety nine sheep for the sake of the one lost...who wouldn't scour the house to find the one lost coin...and the irony in this rhetoric is that not many of us would...it is risky business to possibly sacrifice the whole for the sake of the one lost...sacrifice the established way of things for the one left out...to unsettle the found for the sake of the lost...risky, downright reckless is this seeking love of God.

Luke is telling us in the context of the meal...a meal a symbol of the social order...one commentator said of Luke's Gospel that Jesus and his friends are always on their way to a meal...I can identify with that...anthropologists learn more about ancient civilizations by studying their culinary habits than any other data...the meal the symbol of the social order and a symbol of life itself... a meal the talisman of sacrifice and

hospitality...the way life is meant to be....and if there is anyone, anyone left out of the meal then the human community is compromised...less than whole...there is no true social order, only injustice...the order we think we have accomplished is but an illusion....The message here is that God will not stop God's fierce seeking of the other until all are restored, all reclaimed....and brothers and sisters, as children of God...if you believe you are a child of God...then believe this: We are that restoration...It is we who bear God's passion and mercy to the world....one meal at a time....What if our world were ordered by the art of invitation...the art of collaborative friendship...a world in which all have a share at God's table, and at this opportune time, that includes our brothers and sisters of Islam; that includes our brothers and sisters of every religion, every estate, every race....all of us invited...no one excluded....now, no more us and them ...only us.

This is a story that tells us how to practice the ways of the Commonwealth of God... It is not enough to believe in Jesus...we must live like Jesus and practice the arts of inclusion and embrace and mercy and compassion like Jesus and those who follow in the way of Jesus....that is the way of the so-called kingdom of God that God would have us enact....a kingdom which is no kingdom at all as the world sees kingdoms...but brotherhood, sisterhood, collaborative equality and true freedom....and Luke lets us in on the purpose...the end towards which we travel....and that is joy, true joy. In all three of these passages, we only read the first two...the next passage is about the lost son...lost sheep lost coin and lost son...and when each is found, there is a celebration, a party characterized by abundance and joy...God wants for us joy and we are being told how to bring it about through inclusion and embrace....in the artful practice of sacred hospitality...hospitality that will restore the wounded and the sin-sick...the lost in our midst... and our own lostness, let's not forget about that...let us be about the practice of restoration of our world...That means that anything in our world, the political the social the economic, if anything has an effect on human dignity then its our business...because we must bear God's fiery will, God's fiery passion to seek out the ones left out...because we are all better for it...becoming whole....becoming perfected through enlightened practice...the way God made us....and there will be abundance, and there will be joy...and it all ends in celebration...and that is a promise....there is a balm in Gilead...and dear friends, that balm is our being about our work as children of God....as champions of the good, no less....champions.