

Proper 17 Year C 2019

In our family lore we have a theory about dinner parties... My mother, years ago, articulated it first.... She observed that whenever people gather at your house for a dinner party... everyone at some point or another ends up in the kitchen... sometimes all at once.... This mystery may owe to the contagious energy around preparing a meal... perhaps the allure of creativity; maybe just the smells of good cooking... Finally we came up with this: that the reason people always end up in the kitchen at dinner parties is because the kitchen is the place of transformation... the kitchen is the place of transformation... an outward and visible sign of what life is all about: change and transformation. The kitchen is where ordinary, mundane ingredients are transformed into extraordinary nurture... And a meal is of course much more than the food... it is about welcome and hospitality, and conversation... at the dinner table we find out a lot about people... what they are afraid of; what their hopes are; what makes them happy; their life stories.... There is a delicious intimacy in a meal. Our Eucharist in the church bears witness to the holiness of our breaking bread together; it is the intimacy of the Eucharist, I think that captures our imaginations... But The Eucharist is not the thing.... It points to the thing. It points to the meal, a profound

energizing thing... Could it be that preparing and partaking of a meal, and sharing the intimacy of it, is participating in life's most profound mystery... is it participating in the very life of God? I mean that question in all seriousness.

So in this section of Luke we are told three different stories about meals... lest we miss the point. There's the one we just read that includes instructions for both guests and hosts; and then that is followed by the story of the king throwing a great banquet, the invitation to which his guests regret, and he goes into the streets and the outskirts of town to find people who will come... and then the finale of the meal stories, which is the tale of the prodigal son, and the dinner party thrown by his grateful father.... So Luke clearly sees the meal as important; and I would venture to say that Luke thinks dinner parties are an appropriate symbol for the kingdom of God... the kingdom of God not in the hereafter; the kingdom of God not some future promise... but the kingdom of God manifest in our everyday lives.... The kingdom of God present in our preparing, in our inviting, in our partaking...The mundane and ordinary world we live in, the world of food and hospitality, charged and energized by God's grandeur.

So what do we make of this dinner party Luke tells us about in our reading for today?... Luke knows that most of us generally invite our social peers to our

homes for dinner... Luke knows that there is a social and economic hierarchy, and certainly in his day the social order was much more rigid than what we're used to, maybe... So Luke is again being subversive, challenging the social order, challenging convention, challenging the status quo... One hears in this parable echoes of Mary's voice from the beginning of this gospel about raising up the poor and the abased; scattering the proud; feeding the hungry, the reordering of society... In Mary's song Luke gives us the grand vision of God's kingdom, which is the rising of God's justice; the rising of God's justice which will overturn and set right the social and economic order ... But here Luke is discussing the means of this vision, the details, as it were; he doesn't want to promote a theology or a theory. He's teaching us the 'how' of God's kingdom... How this transformative way of life breaks into our world.

First, he offers advice to the guests of the dinner party: Don't go walking in and sit at the head table... that would be presumptuous; always defer to the needs of the other guests; that's just good manners... Good manners are important; perhaps more than we know. Our mothers were right! And, Luke says, be grateful that you are there in the first place....gratitude is one of the keys to living a meaningful life, and we live in a culture in which gratitude is hard to find. And then Luke offers advice for hosts: Don't throw a party just to look good....

Throw it because it is what we humans do... We invite and welcome, and feed and nurture, because there is nothing that matters more... and, then the hard part, that we extend the invitation to those whom we don't customarily invite, in particular, the poor and the disabled, those caught on the margins, those left out... and finally, that the reward is found in the doing; in the preparing, in the partaking... in the Sacrifice. Folks, this isn't metaphor... this is something Luke is telling us to do in order to bring about God's reign in the here and now.

Sacrifice is a word we use a lot in the church. It's a Greek word which basically means total self-giving, or a predisposition of self-giving. Jesus of course is the exemplar in new Testament literature of sacrifice, giving his life for the cause of justice for the poor and the outcasts... but perhaps the best description of sacrifice that I have heard was given by Fredrick Beuchner, a Presbyterian minister, theologian and writer... He says that sacrifice is like throwing a surprise party for someone you love... It is a ton of work, but the joy of it makes it seem like so little work.

So what Luke is telling us is that the means of Mary's grand vision... the means of the kingdom of God is found in mere, mundane acts of sacrifice... In other words the kingdom of God is a process... The kingdom of God is not a place

to which we arrive... the kingdom of God is not a world different from the one we live in... the kingdom of God, the experience of God, is only apprehended in the way we live... in the means of life; in the unfolding of life, not at the end, but fully present in the journey itself, in the daily..... and it is sacrifice for the other that brings it to birth, manifests it in present time, real time. This is also a teaching on generosity as well, which of course goes hand in hand with sacrifice... that we live in a predisposition of giving... that we only live in this world to give... that is what is asked of us as post modern disciples... that our lives belong to and for the good of our neighbor, plain and simple. And this is not an onus... this is the way to experience the great mystery of life, the truth of it.... to experience its astounding beauty, and the joy beauty engenders.

Sacrifice, generosity, welcome... these are the engines of transformation; the engines of God's revolution. These are the means of restoring our world to goodness... Sacrifice, generosity and welcome, the cure for our dysfunctional democracy....Sacrifice and generosity and welcome, vital elements of a well-served meal; essential assets of the kitchen; essential to the coming of God's reign... It is merely sacrifice and generosity that will subvert the rigid social and economic structures of our world... sacrifice and generosity that will shatter the illusion of hierarchy, the illusion of class, the illusion of race; they will loose the

grip of sin, in short... It is sacrifice and generosity that will recognize and embrace the worth of every human being. In the warmth of the kitchen, where life and light glow with the very light of God's Love.... at the dinner table where all are equals; where all have stories that matter, where all have hopes, where all have worth and dignity; where all are loved... It is at last, Love, love whose means is generosity and sacrifice... It is Love that will revolutionize our world... Yes, revolution, a revolution of shalom... which is a revolution of justice and mutuality and non-violence and welcome and well-being; the marvelous peace of God... Our Baptisms make us revolutionaries, brothers and sisters... And again I want to say, that it is not what lies at the end of this revolutionary enterprise upon which we set our gaze... God's mercy, and kindness, and God's gift of well-being is found in the revolutionary process itself... In our practice... Our practice of sacrifice and generosity... the kingdom is all about means, not ends... Jesus says at the end of our text today that the reward for such generosity and sacrifice is in the resurrection of the righteous...another translation for that phrase is 'the rising of the just'... It is in raising those without, inviting the left out to the table of plenty, inviting them into the intimacy of the human community... that is what so-called salvation is all about... a process, a practice.. of sacrifice... of generosity.

Y'all know I am no biblical literalist... but I challenge you today to do what Luke is instructing us to do... Invite people to a meal in your home who you would not normally invite... Luke says the poor, the lame, the outcast... let's test Luke out on this. I'm serious. He says this is the means of the kingdom of God, no less. He says that this is the way to set Love loose in the world. Let's see. Let's see.