

## Advent I Year C 2024

This past Monday evening Wade in the Water, the community representatives of All Saints and Bethel AME, gathered for a meal and a conversation. Some thirty of us. We spoke of the state of things amid a rich cultural diversity... of Black and White Americans, who have now been meeting together every month for three years. The conversation was more a chorus of lament: of the continuing demise of American Democracy; of the resurgence of racism; of our xenophobic tendencies; of the widening disparity of wealth; of collective deception. For our Black brothers and sisters, it was and is the same old song... shrill and dissonant... the broken harmonies of power and injustice. For us White people, perhaps, a renewed anxiety as to the looming challenge to our privilege and comfort so long embedded in the status quo. As I listened to the conversation I couldn't help but think that the American system has failed us all... that Lord Acton's premise holds... Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely; that the recent election is merely one more brick in the wall of the ramparts of empire. The question that arose in our conversation was the same question that has daunted civilization for at least seven thousand years... Plato, in the fourth century BCE, articulated it in his philosophical speculations: "How then shall we live?" It is **the** question that has kept awake at night many a sage, many a philosopher... poet, prophet, over the ages. It is a recurring question that since recorded history has not lost its urgency. The question is on the lips of all who are paying attention.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a new year in the church. As we approach the darkest day of the year (literally), our liturgy marks the end of things and heralds the hope of a new beginning... such is the cycle of life on earth. Our reading from Luke uses the apocalyptic language of his age, an age wracked with uncertainty: The glaring signs of catastrophe impinging upon the illusions of self-sufficiency and our smug indifference. We are implored to pay attention to such signs, to keep awake to the inevitable cycle of death and life; that the birth for which we long comes not without pain and suffering. It has always been such. It is in short a call to courage, that being a choice to live with integrity in the face of the world falling apart. We muse that “gosh, this scripture is relevant to our own time!” Well, yes!. The world is always falling apart. The sages and prophets in every age have so testified. The world is always in the birth pangs of its remaking. But still the immemorial question persists: How then shall we live? What shall we ever do? One of the participants Monday evening at our gathering asked the question of the clergy present with all seriousness and sincerity... “Where is the Kingdom of God?”

There was a prophet once, the one to whom we give our allegiance, one Jesus of Nazareth, who spoke of the way ahead in the face of tyranny and injustice... a way to face the apocalypse of oppression and violence. His life and ministry engendered a movement, but it was nothing new, I propose. He simply reminded us of who we are, as the great prophets have always done, and, by his life, how we should live in the midst of the world’s violent undoing... the writer of Luke proclaims, with high drama, that we

stand with raised heads in the presence of the Son of Man... The Son of man, that apocalyptic savior from centuries before in Hebrew lore. But Jesus, in between the lines... by his practice gives us a mere practical solution, a model, an answer, perhaps, to the epic question that had so riddled countless generations.... He proposed that we gather for a meal! Amid the hard and mean and chaotic spiral of history it is a meal graciously prepared and generously served that is our salvation... Are you disappointed? Just a meal among friends and invited guests, the beating heart of the universe. That was the *modus operandi* of the Jesus Movement, the community meal, to which all were invited, in particular the immigrant, and the outcast... the poor... women, children... even tax agents and Roman soldiers. Scholars have recognized that the staying power of the Jesus Movement in its infancy, and its spreading throughout the Mediterranean basin, was largely due to the community meal. A meal is our true humanity in microcosm. The table, the altar of the world. Perhaps it is not too bold to say that the gathering at table is the very kingdom of God in its becoming. The kingdom of God is present in the breaking of bread. The kingdom of God does not descend from the heavens... it is manifest in the intimacy of a meal.

My mother used to say that the reason people always end up in the kitchen at dinner parties is because the kitchen is the womb of hospitality and the place of transformation. Perhaps our gathering for a meal is the world's greatest mystery in which the world begins again. A profoundly mundane and *local* mystery with global, universal implications.

It could be that we are called into the mystery of being rather than that of doing. Perhaps our imaginative being leads us into enlightened doing. But first we gather in the sacred mystery of hospitality and welcome in which there is nurture and conversation, in which there is radical mutual regard. There is no greater sacrifice than to share a meal. Eucharistic feasts have been a liturgical practice long before the advent of Christianity. The sacramental meal that we enact every Sunday is testimony, outward and visible sign of the deepest truth among us; that we feed each other, both literally and figuratively. Jesus tells us to do this as often as possible, lest we forget who we are.... a people whose thriving depends on each other's sacrifice. That is what Love is.... and the truth is... we belong to Love, and love renders apocalyptic fear inconsequential.

In my musings this week, I thought of the words written by Percy Dearmer set to music by Harold Friedell... A piece which has become something of an Anthem in the All Saints community:

Draw us in the Spirit's tether,  
For when humbly in Thy name,  
Two or three are met together  
Thou are in the midst of them;  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Touch we now Thy garment's hem.

As the brethren used to gather  
In the name of Christ to sup,  
Then with thanks to God the Father  
Break the bread and bless the cup,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
So knit Thou our friendship up.

All our meals and all our living

Make as sacraments of Thee,  
That by caring, helping, giving  
We may true disciples be.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
We will serve Thee faithfully.

Perhaps friendship is the name of the mystery; friendship being the love of the other at least as much as we love ourselves. That is what Love requires in the face of the world's unravelling. The Spirit leads us to the table... a moment of eternity in a world of change and transience. The gathering at table insists on being, not doing. Our gathering is the critical mass of the Spirit, and our sharing a meal sustains it.

Could it be that the world's redemption begins where two are three are gathered where bread is broken? Can we possibly know how our proximity to each other might ramify? Could it be that life on earth is so simple? Are our neuroses of the heroic human mere quixotic distraction?

To stand before the Son of Man, I believe, is to simply practice the way of ancient wisdom... to feed, to cloth, to heal, to welcome... to be proximate, in short, to the lonely and left out, and to each other. Later in this Gospel Luke will go on to say that the risen Jesus is recognized in the context of a meal; three lost souls on the road sharing a morsel of eternity. It seems such a small thing, but it is so much more than enough.