

15th Sunday After Pentecost

“WE MUST ALL EAT IF WE ARE TO LIVE”

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Luke 14:12 - 14

Two weeks ago we were pleasantly surprised by the visitation of two AME ministers who had vacationed in our area near by. During the passing of the peace that first week they assured me they simply wanted to be ministered to rather than minister to others as their calling required. Rev. Anderson, I recall now allowed simply that she and Rev. Thomas only wished to “be fed.” At the end of service last week our two guests wanted to know where they might go for a genuine southern style cooked meal. Ordinarily, I might have accompanied them to one of the local restaurants for a shared meal before they undertook their long trip home to Atlantic City and New York. After all, I had been their host for our worship services and etiquette demands additional graces, these civilizing table manners. But as it was, I could only suggest where they might go because I had another engagement to attend to

that afternoon. Andrea and I were invited guests to a wedding feast on the other side of Charlottesville and we were anxious to arrive on time.

Earlier this week, on Wednesday, Mary Baldwin College's community attended the opening convocation for faculty and staff to hear President Fox's annual State of the College address, which was followed by a reception that featured among other things fruits, cheeses, cookies, ham biscuits, and coffee. Prior to the faculty retreat that followed later that afternoon we were invited to have lunch at the cafeteria at the Dean's expense. And finally, as the day wound down our whole community was once again urged to attend the President's picnic for all college employees. We feasted on pulled pork, a variety of salads and other goodies, all of which we washed down with wine, soda and water.

And Friday, just this Friday past our church hosted the most heavily attended potluck dinner we have ever had since its institution nearly four years ago. As fate would have it, our guests intersect our lives in many different ways as fellow Christians, friends, acquaintances and colleagues. But our mission Friday transcended the easy leisure one takes in the company of friends and relatives. It had the solemn purpose of considering the original sin of America herself, which is racism and seeking God's salvation from it

through the transport of broken bread. For we have long sensed that our churches and the races they have come historically to comprise are so many islands bobbing on a roiling sea intended to separate us without commerce, without a common language and absent even a translatable grammar.

But on Friday we signaled our intention to break the spell of suspicion, mistrust and enmity by sharing what is common to all, common to friends and foes, common to masters and slaves, to rich and poor, to vagabonds and viceroys, to paupers and princes, to white and black, males and females, young and old. I shared this thought with those at my table Friday evening and I was stunned by the response of one of the members from Trinity Church. She said with a chuckle that she thought I was about to say something profound. What I had said I assured her was profound. "We must all eat if we are to live." It's a truth as simple as it is deep but to say it is simple is not to say it is thin.

I am in the very best company in this conviction because Jesus is a true gustatory savior. He delights in meals throughout the gospels and not just because eating is so splendid a metaphor for his messianic purposes. He eats with disciples whom he calls away from occupations devoted to the harvesting of different foods. He eats with women who fuss over kitchen duties, and

women who simply want the crumbs from under the table. He eats with the sinners who exploit the people for taxes beyond their means, he eats with the unwashed who lack access to sanitizer in the open fields and yes . . . he even eats with Pharisees who have invited him to dinner.

My point is that Jesus loves to eat and, if scripture is to be believed, he **never eats alone**. The word made flesh eats and drinks and this is manifestation alone of the love of God for God's creation. So I repeat my observation. "We must all eat if we are to live." This is a profound word indeed for it gathers up spirit and body together in the seamless reality of the everyday. It is the reality of everyday people in an everyday world. Did not Jesus himself teach us to pray "give us this day our daily bread"?

But Luke has a powerful point to make in his telling of the good news. Jesus was invited to sup with a leader of the Pharisees. Immediately, we are to understand that social and status imperatives of the time mean that if Jesus was invited to meal by so significant a host that Jesus was recognized and acknowledged as an equal, an equal in standing and station. For the politics of shared tables insisted that decorum required you burnish your reputation by keeping the company of the elite. Moreover, you invited those who were able to reciprocate, which is why these invitations could be the cause of so

much anxiety. When an invited guest turned down the offer to eat with a distinguished associate or relative it was because that invited guest knew the possibility of reciprocating exceeded his ability to do so. In other words, the host had overestimated the resources of this potential guest in just the way that the guest had bluffed. The invitation now requires this invitee to confess to himself the folly of his pretense.

This is the socially constructed understanding of power in the first century world into which the son of man had come and because Jesus loves to eat Jesus accepts the invitation of his esteemed host. Notice now how those attending this most particular feast are disposed toward this unusual guest. They are “watching him closely.” That is to say the show of hospitality is but a thinly disguised trap to catch Jesus in an inappropriate word or deed in order to devour him. Jesus was to be the main course at this grisly banquet.

Now the rules governing the behavior of hosts are violated in watching Jesus at table in this way. But Jesus too violates the rules from the other end. He heals a man afflicted with dropsy and asks if this is inappropriate on the Sabbath, inviting the onlookers to judge whether miracles that work a great good can ever be inappropriate. In the silence that ensues he then instructs the honored assembly in the tact one should take in securing one’s seat at

table. When Andrea, Donovan and I arrived at the wedding feast last week we did not make our way to a table closest to the bride and groom. We sought out the table to which we had been assigned because we were grateful just to have a seat at all. Jesus cautions all of us that at the feast that matters most those attention seeking chair hawks, those pride soaked pretenders and those pompous princes of presumption will receive a very public comeuppance when asked to move to make way for a more honored guest.

When Jesus addressed the code that every man understood as governing his relations to those equal in privilege, when Jesus critiqued that code in this candid way he turned the usual expectations on their head. And he incurred even greater antipathy when he began audaciously to instruct his host how a **good** host should behave. “He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a **luncheon** or a **dinner**, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.’” Jesus makes it explicit what is concealed in the law of hospitality as it was practiced among the social elites of his day. They traded in favors that shut out the luckless, the unloved, the homeless and the poor. Their show of generosity was but the outer garment of their greed but the savior compels us along a more excellent way. “But when

you give a **banquet**, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

Jesus turns **the tables**, so to say, to precisely those who are utterly incapable of transactions in kind. He sets at table those who can never repay.

Did I say Jesus loves to eat? Well, Jesus loves to eat and he affirms our taking delight in eating too because he was accustomed to inviting others to eat with him. He did so after his resurrection when his disciples answered his call to an early breakfast at dawn over fish he had prepared. He did so following a sermon about the virtues of the meek and humble when he noticed that the teeming crowds were famished as daylight began to withdraw. He did so when he hosted the sacred Passover meal, which he transformed because he offered neither lamb nor wine but his own body and blood instead. He is the host who becomes the host, the broken body and the shed blood. The sacrament is that holy feast in which the host feed his guests from his own substance.

You and I are invited to this feast and neither you nor I deserve to be here. We have the choicest seats too for not one of us is seated at a numbered table but we are elected by this holiest of hosts to receive what we could never repay. We are by degree poor in spirit, deaf, dumb and blind but he has called

us up higher than we could ever have climbed for we are unworthy but he is sublime.

We had dinner Friday without assigned seating. We asked whoever would to come to share our stories along with our bread for in our stories are our lives and in our bread is our life together. This is profound beyond degree, fundamental truth for creatures fashioned from the earth whose bodies are sustained by cabbage, carrots and celery and whose spirits are sustained by an exchange of smiles, shared sufferings and warm embraces. I say pass the potatoes please, and you ask for the tomatoes instead and these we pass from hand to hand in the hope of a life well lived, which is the only life worth living, the life we give to neighbor, friend and foe.

Here is food for thought, food to energize you for tomorrow's burdens and next year's trials. You and I received our invitations from God to sup at his table. He does not request our RSVP for he expects we will accept. We should accept because his table matters most of all. Not to put too fine a point upon it, but our lives depend upon our accepting this invitation. I am not too busy and neither are you. You have no excuse and neither do I. He serves us best who made both you and me and when we are seated the heavens shout a glorious jubilee. So do not wait, and do not demure but

hasten to God's great party where the saints and the sinners bear the same first name. Hungry! That's your rightful name, yours and mine. Hungry!

Now pass the Justice please and if you wish I will pass the Courage. But did you notice the immoderate use of Mercy our host extended in inviting wretches like you and me? I wonder what he has saved for dessert after a meal like this. Oh my God, just look at what cleanses the palate as it pleases my taste? And see here, the more of it I have the more of it I crave, the richest store of Wisdom God grants to all who would savor it. It goes to prove this one thing I know and I know it with highest, holy humor and sober, searching seriousness. "We must all eat if we are to live." Not I, this solitary cipher, not you, that unbreachable other, but place the accent here where the need for table becomes most apparent. "WE, We, We must all eat if we are to live."

1 September 2013