

“Finding Our Intersections”

Rev. David Gregory

August 5, 2018

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost



Scripture reading

Luke 14:16-24 (New Revised Standard Bible)

Then Jesus said, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’

“So the servant returned and reported this to the host. Then the host became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the host said to the servant, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

Second reading

Bishop Yvette Flunder

from *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion*

I believe the table of God must be a welcome table where many theologies can coexist and be heard ... It would be a wonderful thing to behold, especially for me and folks like me who represent and constantly interact with people on the margins of many groups. I cling to a strong Christology and good old gospel music; I speak in tongues and have a personal relationship with Jesus, while I also believe in an educated clergy, a woman’s right to choose, and full rights for same gender loving people to marry and raise children. I am a Pentecostal traditionalist and a reconciling liberation theologian. It’s like being a chittlin burrito with capers ... so many things at one time; but I have a place at the feast of God!

So, what do you think of Jesus? Drop that name in most any place you go and you'll get any number of reactions, and most of them will have little to do with a man named Jesus who lived in a village called Nazareth 2,000 years ago. Marcus Borg referred to him as the "historical Jesus." The ironic thing about this historical Jesus is that we do not really know enough about him to form a strong opinion, but that has never stopped us from doing so. We should note, then, that our opinions about Jesus do not have their origins in Jesus, but come from the people near and far, both ancient and modern, who have told us about him.

As an exercise, I'd like to ask someone who was here last week to describe the experience. What did you see? What did you hear? What were the ideas and principles that were expressed in the message last week? (Clue: this is not a shaming exercise to see how much you can remember.) Can you remember verbatim any of the words I said? Would anyone like to tell us what they just said? Do this for forty, fifty, even sixty years. Scribble the words down once in a while, and pass them around. Collect the stories. Argue about them with each other. "I heard him say that." "No, that's not what he said." "He meant it this way."

This is how we came to have the gospels. They were collections of oral traditions that grew up in communities associated with particular teachers. Eventually there were scribes who put the stories on scrolls, and the scrolls were preserved as best they could be at the time. No fountain pens, no printing presses, no Word docs with time stamps; just traditions, passing through the generations by people who thought they were worth preserving. And from those primitive ancient writings—the ones that survived, that is—emerge a number of pictures of this religious insurgent who seems to have lived and taught among the poorest peasant population in Galilee when it was under the harsh authority of the Roman empire, assisted by a corrupt religious system that was trying very hard to maintain what little power it had left.

From the writings that we have, which are the only real sources available, it is clear that this Jesus of Nazareth did not present himself as the founder of a new world religion. He was born a Jew, he lived as a Jew, and he died as a Jew. He left a group of followers who were Jewish. He did not leave them with a system of belief or a body of doctrine that was anything other than Jewish. He simply taught them a way of life that would embody the heart of who they were as people of God, and that way of life was simply love. *I give you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for each other.* Love, love, love, love, love, love.

It wasn't until the fourth century when this "way" of love had permeated the empire to the degree that masses of people were responding to it, that Constantine made Christianity the official religion. There were tribunals and councils that would determine a system of belief, a body of doctrine. There would be determinations about what constituted the official sacred writings, which writings could stay, which ones could be discarded. The disclaimer here is that I am being utterly simplistic. I have to be or you all might go to sleep. The point is that the church—as we have known it—was not created by the historical Jesus. So when I ask you, "What do you think of Jesus?" I'm not really wanting to know about your good or bad experiences of church. I'm really

asking what you think about the way of life that this man and his early followers seemed to live. What do you think about the love that they embodied for one another? What do their practices teach us about humanity, about God, and about the world they lived in? And what does it mean for us in the world that we live in?

If you ask me what I think of Jesus I'll have to say that if we can leave the trappings of religious systems and look at what he *said*, we can find a lot of intersections in this room, a lot of intersections in this world. Bishop Yvette Flunder, longtime leader of City of Refuge United Church of Christ in Oakland (formerly in San Francisco) is a study in what it means to find a way of life as opposed to a system of belief.

I cling to a strong Christology and good old gospel music, I speak in tongues and have a personal relationship with Jesus, while I also believe in an educated clergy, a woman's right to choose and full rights for same gender loving people to marry and raise children. I am a Pentecostal traditionalist and a reconciling liberation theologian. It's like being a chittlin burrito with capers ... so many things at one time; but I have a place at the feast of God!"

Have you any idea how many systems of belief she references when she says that she is a Pentecostal traditionalist and a reconciling liberation theologian? Some would say that she has no theology at all, that there is no way anyone can adhere to that many religious systems and have one consistent, coherent theology. Exactly. What her work tells us is that people can get along more easily than their theologies do.

Some of you have heard me refer to a photograph in my office. It is of the celebration of our granddaughter's first birthday, a year and a half ago. We all know a first birthday is a reason to celebrate, but this wasn't just any celebration. What was remarkable about this birthday is that it was held at the home of my former wife and her husband, both of whom are evangelical Baptists. Tripp and I were invited to attend, as well as the sisters (with their families) of our daughter-in-law, Tahmina, who are Muslims whose parents emigrated from Bangladesh. It was a lovely gathering—of Baptists, gays, and Muslims. All were happy, all were embracing. No one talked about their point of view. The only point of view that mattered was this little girl that we all adore, and that was the love that filled the room. At the end of the day the Baptists were still Baptist, the gays were still gay, and the Muslims were still Muslim. And it was wonderful. It occurred to me then that this is a model for how the church could be. It is also how our country could be. We all have a place at the feast of God.

The table that is before us is an opportunity for us to be less dismissive and more hospitable. It has nothing to do with doctrinal purity, which doesn't really exist, anyway. Rather, it is an expression of expansive love and extravagant welcome, the kind that builds bridges instead of walls. And if the bridge is wide enough, we can all get there.

Amen.

