

“Whoever and Whatever”
Rev. David Gregory
August 28, 2022
12th Sunday after Pentecost



Invitation to the Feast
Eugène Burnand

Readings

Luke 14:1, 12-14
from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

One time when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees, all the guests had their eyes on him, watching his every move.

And he said to the host, “The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing. They won’t be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God’s people.”

“Soup”
a poem by Lynn Ungar in her book *Breathe*

The bones and bits
of what used to be roast chicken.
The tops of the beets
that have already gone for salad.
The beans that expanded into excess,
as beans tend to do.
An onion not quite past
the salvage point.
The art of being human
is the art
of making soup
from what remains.

A number of you are becoming more familiar with Brian McLaren, whose latest book *Do I Stay Christian?* is a title that might create a bit of a stir in some circles, but given the present moment, I'd say it's an important question to ask. Early in my ministry with you I said that if someone were to ask me if I were a Christian, my response would be, "I will answer that question as long as I can tell you what I mean by that." After all that has happened in the last five years, this caveat has become even more crucial, for the term "Christian" has taken on even more levels of meaning. By "Christian" do we mean Catholic or Protestant? Presbyterian or Baptist? Modernist or Fundamentalist? Evangelical or Neo-Evangelical?

Christians in the 20th century were often obsessed with labels and theological positions, having the idea that we could sift and sort our way to what was *true* Christianity and what was not. There were questions about biblical inerrancy, the place of women in leadership, and whether church governance should be episcopal (hierarchical), presbyterian (representative), or congregational (democratic). We reached for examples in the early church to prove that our own system was the correct one, and then we set about to follow that correct system to create the correct institutions that would express correct theology. And now in the 21st century, even former Evangelicals like Brian McLaren are simply saying "So what?" to all of that, because in this century when we ask "Are you a Christian?" we have to take into account an added layer of Christianity characterized by Christian Nationalism and/or white supremacy. Are you one of *these* Christians or one of *those* Christians, or are you some other kind of Christian?

There's something in this conversation that is completely missing, and believe it or not, it's Jesus. If you listen to the cacophony coming from Christian pundits, preachers, and commentators, notice how rarely the name of Jesus comes up. The reason for this is that Jesus was not a Christian; he wasn't Catholic, Presbyterian, or Baptist. The Jesus we read about in the gospels does not fit into any of the systems we have mentioned. He's not part of any of our elaborate ecclesiastical creations. He did not come to establish a new world religion. He was a young activist, an insurgent Jewish rabbi living in first-century Palestine whose focus seemed to be speaking truth to power with not too many words, and a whole lot of loving action. The loving way he approached whoever he encountered regardless of whatever path they were on was so radical, so counter-cultural, and so foreign to the status quo, that he was deemed too radical, and they killed him for it. And they are still killing him.

Today's gospel is so telling, isn't it? We often see Jesus going to the outcasts, the Samaritans, the tax collectors, the hungry, the sick, the sex workers, the helpless, the marginalized. We don't often see him at the fancy dinner table of the religious and political elite, but in this passage from Luke it's exactly where he is. And we read that everyone had their eyes on him. He was a conundrum: he was highly conversant in the Law of Moses; he was a teacher who with little apparent education possessed a wisdom that enabled him to bring a word or two forward from the Law to give insight, to heal wounds, and to provide solace. He could easily cut to the core of the heart of injustice with a phrase or two; he didn't have to yell it. The words themselves were powerful enough. He originated the art of "comforting the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable." So at this meal, everyone waits with bated breath. What will he say? What will he do? This is a dangerous situation.

And he said to the host, “The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing. They won’t be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God’s people.”

So you’re the host, this very important person, part of the religious and political elite. What do you do now? What we know from the rest of this passage in Luke is that one of the other dinner guests spiritualized it by saying that it will be wonderful to eat bread in the coming Kingdom of God, and Jesus, as he often did, used this remark as a teaching moment by means of a parable:

A man planned a great feast and invited his neighbors to come. Once the meal was prepared, he sent his servants out to gather the guests. But they all had an excuse as to why they could not be there. They were busy buying things, surveying their lands, or otherwise admiring their own lives. The host in turn said to his servants, “Go out and get whoever will come. Get the poor, the sick, the needy, and have them come in.”

Put out the invitation to whomever will come and give them the places of honor. This is the heart of Jesus, the meaning of grace itself. There is unmerited favor here in the way no one is left out, no one’s status keeps him or her outside the door. No matter who they were or where they were on life’s journey, they were welcome.

So I say to you this morning, if when you ask me if I am a Christian and this is what you mean, I’d say yes. Do I attempt to follow the example and the words of Jesus, then *YES!* Am I trying to follow the religion of empire, the Christianity that is married to politics, the system that excludes anyone who isn’t white, euro, hetero, or patriarchal? Then *no*. If that is what you mean, then I am not a Christian.

Brian McLaren and others are making the point that following Jesus is not about being more of what makes you Christian. Following Jesus is about what makes you human. The New Reformation is a quiet one. It’s like a leavening agent that gets into a lump of dough and operates silently, but invincibly, without reservation or reluctance. It involves doing what we can from where we are with what we have and letting that be enough. We’re taking the bones and bits of Christian faith, the pieces that the noisy folks have left behind, and in the salvage of what has been refused, we find all the makings of a delicious soup. *The art of being human is the art of making soup from what remains.*

