

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Luke 11: 37-54

This is the sermon I had been hoping to avoid ever since the election. I had been hoping to avoid this particular sermon because once the words are out of my mouth, there is no telling how they will be interpreted. I guess before I wrote this sermon, I should have given my Pastoral Care Team a warning to expect some phone calls. So if it is not too late....Jim Hoppin, Ouita Michel, and Buddy Johnson...expect some phone calls on Monday morning and then we can get together this week to meet.

I had wanted to avoid this particular sermon because there seems to be no civil discourse anymore. We just make assumptions about each other based on how the other person cast his or her vote in the past presidential election. It seems that the only way we can relate to one another as human beings is by creating characters of each other or by slapping unflattering labels upon one another. There seems to be no search for commonality among our nation anymore. No conversations seeking that one thing which will united us at our core as humanity. During the last few months, there seems to be only hurt and bitter words between the people of our nation and our community.

Too many times this past week, I have been reminded that as a prophet announcing the coming of God's Kingdom, I can no longer stay silent in the face of this brokenness that is dividing and tearing our communities apart. Too many times since this past election, I have been told that the church should just mind our own business and stick to what we know best...that is loving others as God loves us...okay at least trying to love others as God has loved us. Too many times, I have been told the reason for this supposed separation of state and church is because Jesus wasn't political, that he minded his own business and stuck to what he knew...calling us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I have to tell you, when I hear statements like these, statements which try to solidify the separation of church and state, I want to ask the other person...Do you not remember the time Jesus turned over the tables in the Temple and why he did so? Do you not remember the time when Jesus called out the Jewish religious leaders for buddying up to the Roman government? Do you not remember any of these incidents, incidents which are clearly written down in our Bibles? Do you not remember the time when Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin and they accused him of being the King of the Jews, that he was announcing a new Kingdom, a Kingdom that at its very heart defied the very political system of the Roman government? That's why Jesus was killed the way he was. Crucifixion was the Roman government's way of saying to the people: Do not stir dissent or this is

what will happen to you and anyone else who decides to stir up trouble by challenging the Roman Empire. Crucifixion was punishment for those convicted of a civil crime as a political weapon. It was not punishment for a religious crime. The Sanhedrin, the religious leaders, had nothing on Jesus. That's why they turned him over to Pilate. Only Rome could convict Jesus on the grounds of being falsely accused as the King of the Jews. The very title given to Jesus by others was a threat to the Roman Empire.

So let's be clear... as people of faith, we are wrong when we say Jesus wasn't political. All the time, he was calling out the powers that be, powers which controlled the governing systems through their wealth and might. All the time, Jesus was confronting the ruling system, whether it was political or religious. It didn't matter. Because...all the time Jesus was calling out the religious leaders, the political leaders because their actions never matched the words of justice and compassion that they were speaking.

So truth be told, as people of faith, when we make statements about why the church shouldn't be involved in politics, we are conveniently ignoring the fact that, yes, during his time in ministry, Jesus may not have been partisan. He may not have campaigned for a particular party but Jesus was always, always political. And our text today is a prime example of that fact.

Here's why I say this: This section of Luke contains one of the three dinner scenes in which Jesus has been invited to dine as a guest of a Pharisee. We begin our text by reading that all the guest had showed up. The table had been set. Dinner was ready to be served. And then...boom, confrontation between Jesus and the powers that be begins or should I say continues.

It all starts because Jesus' table manners scandalize his host. The correct behavior in this scene is similar as to when we invite people to dinner in our own houses. The expectation is that the guest will wash his or her hands before eating. Common courtesy, right? Because who knows where those hands have been. Who knows what those hands have been touching.

And well, since we are talking about Jesus, we all know where his hands had been. Jesus has been hanging out with people who needed healing from their diseases. He has been hanging out with people who were considered unclean by the religious community because of their supposed sins. Let's be honest, we all know where Jesus' hands had been. They had been doing the down and dirty work of loving others as God has loved us.

So it is no surprise that the host speaks up when Jesus doesn't wash his hands before dinner. I'm sure the host politely pulls Jesus over to side and says, "Jesus, how about you wash up before supper? I'm sure you have all sorts of stuff

on your hands. I don't want you to contaminate this lovely meal we've prepared. To which Jesus replies...wait for it because if this isn't a political statement, than I don't know what is. "You Pharisees and lawyers care more about outer appearances than you do about the inner being. The outside of your cup of life maybe clean but the inside of the vessel, the very vessel which is supposed to reflect the image of God, is disgusting and dirty. "If the fact that my hands which have fed the multitudes, if my hands which have healed the sick, if my hands which have been ushering in the Kingdom of God, if the fact that my hands are considered dirty is your biggest concern, then we've got a problem."

Now, you see why Jesus wasn't welcomed at dinner a whole lot during his ministry. Sure, he had lots of invitations to come to the Table but it was always expected that he would play by the rules, the rules set by the powers that be. And surprise, surprise, he never did!

So, after Jesus confronts his host, Jesus then goes on to give a long discourse of woes against the Pharisees and the lawyers gathered around the table. The bottom line is that Jesus points out to the Pharisees and the lawyers that they are not practicing what they preach. There are big inconsistencies between their lives, between their actions and the teachings they expected others to live up to. How can they talk about love and welcome in the sermons they give in synagogue, in the rhetoric they share in the courtroom when their very own actions put barriers up

and keep people out? How could they think God would be okay with that? Did they not remember the prophets? Every single one of the prophets called out the people when they forgot about their called to usher in justice, to work for healing and wholeness, not just for a select few but for all of God's children.

Jesus is reminding the religious leaders, he is reminding the political leaders that the Kingdom of God doesn't do what we expect it to do. It doesn't play by our rules. It doesn't follow our expectations. The Kingdom of God turns our world upside and inside out, while ushering in the justice and compassion of God.

At its core, the Kingdom of God tells us that all are welcome to the Table. Regardless of political party, regardless of what we believe, regardless of how we voted, all are invited to come and experience the love and grace of God. At the very heart of the Kingdom of God lies the understanding that all are to work together towards building up the Kingdom of God here on earth so that justice and wholeness will reign for all of god's children.

Or let me say it this way...as people of faith, it doesn't matter what we say, what we believe, or what we do, if we don't have a deep passion and love for all of God's children, a deep passion and love for all of God's creation, if we aren't being political like our Savior was during his ministry here on earth by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near for all of God's children, no ifs, ands or

but, if as people of faith, we are not working to remove the barriers which the powers that be put up to keep some in and others out, if we are not coming together to work for justice, to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's children, then we have nothing. We stand for nothing, and no one, no one is going to care if we continue to exist as an institution. Because we are just an empty shell of ourselves. We are a clean vessel on the outside but on the inside, we are not reflecting the light and love of God, we are not reflecting the image of God who loves this world more than we will ever know.

As the church, as people of faith, our greatest wake-up call is happening right now. Our lack of coming together to work for God's justice, our lack of practicing what we preach shows the rest of the world that we care more about outer appearances than we do about reflecting the image of God to others, than we do about announcing God's Kingdom in our midst. Our lack of compassion, our lack of welcome, our lack of being the Body of Christ, doing the down and dirty of the Kingdom of God reflects poorly on us. But more importantly, it goes against the very character and nature of our God, our God who calls us to care for the widows and orphans, our God who tells us to treat the refugees and immigrant aliens in our midst as our brothers and sisters. It goes against the very character and nature of our God who tells us that everything we do to the least of these, we do it to our God. How can we forget this? How can we forget all the times Jesus

spoke up, that Jesus spoke out against the injustice that he saw, injustice created by a broken and corrupt system, a system that was run by those with wealth and power, those who would do anything to stay in power. How can we forget that Jesus turned to Pilate and said, “You say that I am the King of the Jews but I tell you, I am ushering in a new way, a new way of justice, a new way of compassion, a new way where love and grace will reign.

We should never ever forget, we should never ever ignore that it is written that they will know us by our love. It doesn't say they will know us by our outer appearances. How can we forget this?

Before I get too far in front of myself, this seems to be the appropriate time in the sermon for a confession. I included the picture which is on the front of the bulletin because...well, it goes along with our theme but also because Greensboro, NC is my hometown. Growing up, I don't remember ever really being taught about the sit in at the lunch counter by these young men. I don't remember ever really having any conversations about this moment of history that happened in my very own backyard. If the sit in was mentioned, it was always in passing...like on this day, this thing happened but we would rather talk about this other event in history.

Growing up as a young girl, I knew that my mom worked in downtown Greensboro, but I didn't know her office was about two blocks from the old

Woolworth building where the sit in took place. I knew my home church was on West Market Street but I didn't it was also just a few miles down the road from the place where these three men were denied service, all because of the color of their skin.

Now, I can't say for sure, why this moment in civil rights history was never really talked about or mentioned in my home or in my schools while growing up...but as a disciple of Christ, whose very core identity is shaped by the Lord's Supper, as an adult looking back, I am confused and hurt as to why we didn't talk about this moment in our church, or in our youth groups. Maybe we didn't talk about this moment because it was too political at the time and even after all the years had passed, it was better to not confront the ugliness of segregation. Maybe in good Southern fashion, the church decided to hold on to its outer appearances and forget about a moment when it did not act as the People of the Table, people who practice the complete Welcome of God.

Sure it is easy to point fingers while looking back. I could easily blame the leadership of my congregation. Or I could easily say the youth sponsors did a disservice to us young people, by ignoring such a teachable moment. Or I could face the facts, and admit that I was just as complacent in the system as all the others, regardless of the time that had passed because after all...I saw racism happening in my school and didn't speak up. I saw the system keeping other out

while inviting others in and I didn't speak out against it. It is time to realize that too many times in my life, I have been more concerned with outer appearances than with reflecting the light and love of God.

It is easy to point fingers at others...for us to sit and accuse the Pharisees, to say we will never be like the lawyers. It is easy to blame other for caring more about power and might, to pretend that when the time actually comes, we will speak up. We will speak out. But in reality, that's not true. That's why Luke adds this story. To not to allow his community to have such illusions that such injustices will never happen on their watch. To caution his community that it is easy to judge other but what would happen if Jesus came to dinner at their house. What would he find? What would he bring to our attention? What would he say to us as ones who are supposed to be proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near?

You see, as disciples of Christ, what happens around the Lord's Table matters. It shapes our faith. It shapes how we live out that faith. As a disciples, when we are at the Table, whether that be our dining room tables, at our tables in the fellowship hall, or at this very Table that is the very center and core of our worship to God, the words we hear seep into our being and become powerful reminders that God is God and we are not. At the Table, the prayers for the bread of life, prayers for the cup of the new covenant, the Words of Institution, words which center us in the presence of God, all of these become powerful reminders

that as people of faith, we are called to create safe spaces for conversations, conversations which help us find our commonality as human kind, conversations that bridge our differences and open our eyes to the image of God reflected in all we encounter. As people of faith, we are to be vessels of hope, vessels of peace, vessels of justice, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near because after all, guess who is coming to dinner? Amen.