

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/June 12, 2016

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In Jesus' time the table at which one gathered for a feast had a social function. It established "a social ranking by what one eats, how one eats, and with whom one eats." Now Jesus comes along and mixes all this up. The host is disapproving saying to himself that Jesus, with all the status of a prophet, should have known what sort of woman this is who is bathing his feet with tears and anointing them with perfume. A woman, a sinner, has no place at this table. But Jesus makes no appropriate distinctions.

This week I was called in for Jury Duty. I am no lawyer but I sense this same setting aside of ranking, this mixing up of status. Everyone is called to participate. The court makes it very clear that every defendant has the presumption of innocence. There is no prior knowledge of sin, such as maintained by the host of Jesus' meal. We find ourselves strangely unified in a process that seeks to establish justice.

During the lunch break I went to the Reading Terminal Market. I sat at a table next to a homeless man. He pointed out the television that he could see from where he sat. He always took this seat. He appreciated the fact that I did not dismiss him and we could chat together. Some girls on a field trip from a school in Brooklyn sat down at the table and he scored half a sandwich. I wished him well as we said our goodbyes. It was Jesus' kind of table – homeless man, school girls, Episcopal priest.

As Jesus shows us our unity is often messy, mixed up, and in need of restraint. William Countryman writes a poem that explores this unity among Jesus' disciples.

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on their own initiative. Peter was always out front, falling on his face; Simon the Zealot standing at the edge, waiting to catch another fault in his less pious brethren. Andrew and Philip were doers, trying to get on with the business of the day, if only they could learn what it was. Thomas, always perplexed. Judas Iscariot, the one who would keep score and therefore held the ministry of the exchequer. Matthew, the reformed tax-collector, never fully trusted by the rest. As odd an assortment as one's own family or the people where one works.

Or we might add, the church where we worship. Some shop for church and they want to see a flawless performance, a congregation that looks just like them. They might leave disappointed, and if they do not come back they miss the family, the table at which Jesus presides over a mix of people, where everyone has a seat, a community that is not self-selected and would not form much of a team on their own initiative. We fall, we criticize, we try to figure out what we are supposed to do, we keep score, we mistrust. We are, as William Countryman says, an odd assortment. But the grace is, if we want to take our seat, there is a place for each of us. We are each one of us needed. We are each one of us known.

Now, the question is, what holds Jesus' mixed up community together? One answer is that it is our common story, "the old, old story," as we sometimes sing, "of Jesus and his love." It is the gospel story of love stronger than death, of unity overcoming division. It is the story of the cross and resurrection where God takes the initiative to forgive and impart new life.

Paul sends his letter to the Galatians because Peter has (to Paul's mind) fallen on his face again. He had been enjoying open fellowship with Jewish

and Gentile Christians. But when Jewish teachers from the Apostle James came (who did not believe in sharing communion with Gentile believers), Peter withdrew from the Lord's table. His action suggests that Gentiles are inferior to Jews.

Paul begins by finding common ground with those who take this opposite position from his own, and from how he understands the gospel. "We ourselves are Jews by birth," he says. We are all the same. But guess what? We also share a common story. You know that story as well as I do. It is not a story about power and privilege, but it is the story of the cross. It is story that finds its roots in the story of Nathan who confronts King David, who speaks truth to power. It is risky for Nathan to tell this story, and so he does so by means of a parable. A rich man with many flocks took the one little lamb from a poor man that was all he had. He did it because he could, and prepared the lamb as a meal for his guest, leaving the poor man with nothing. King David was incensed and Nathan said to him, "You are the man!" The gospel we share does not allow us to presume that we are more important than another. The gospel does not allow us to take power over another. In the same way, Jesus tells his host a parable. A debtor owed a sum equal to a laborer's wages for a year and four months. It was more than could be repaid. The creditor cancelled the debt leading to the other's overwhelming love. Just so, the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears, had been forgiven much. She with her overwhelming expression of love has a place in the mix of guests that are welcome at Jesus' table. That is the gospel story. It is the message that unifies us, a message of respect, forgiveness, and consequent love. The community of the church is based upon this gospel alone, not upon flawless performance or appearance.

So what is the upshot of living by the gospel story, not the "what we can take" story? We don't take life, we give life. With another mass shooting this time in Orlando, Florida, the world needs to hear a gospel story of inclusion, a forgiving God, and consequent love. We live by the gospel story not the "what we deserve or achieve" story. First we enter into a community that takes its cue from baptism. There is one Baptism, one Body, one Spirit, and one hope. We affirm our unity by virtue of God's initiative to love, to forgive, to include.

We pledge to show up, to take our place at Jesus' table and to continually grow into the likeness of Christ. This is an act of hope in a divisive world. When Jesus' name is pronounced over that child's head Isla enters into the diverse, inclusive, grace-filled unity with God and all others. She begins to live out the gospel story. Jesus shows what this looks like, overcoming the prejudices of his day to include women as well as men in his ministry. Paul says we live out this story by giving, not taking. He gave this concrete expression by collecting an offering for the church in Jerusalem. The gospel story demands our giving for the sake of our unity. And to be honest, this isn't an obligation, a grudging duty, it's a joy. We are one community where it is about life, hope, blessings, and love. To give for that is a joy. Finally, like Jesus, we tell the story. It is the gospel story that binds us together. It is the good news of the kingdom of God, the mending of creation. Tell that story when you are with a friend who needs a word of hope. Tell that story to a colleague who is feeling alone. Tell that story to a family member who needs encouragement. Tell that story even to a church member during one of those spiritually dry times that come to us all. Like Jesus bring the good news, tell that story, the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

The gospel story of the cross and resurrection is a story that ignores social ranking and makes room for all. It is a justice story where reputation is set aside and loving service is what counts. It is a table story that includes a forgiven sinner, a homeless man, school girls, a strange assortment of disciples, Jews, gentiles, men and women. It is a story of givers not takers. It is a story worth telling.

*Amen.*