

June 17th, 2007

Proper 6, Year C, RCL

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1 Kings 21:1-21a

Psalm 5:1-8

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

The Collect

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The Sermon- Uninvited Guests

Giving dinner parties can be stressful, even if the invited guests are good friends. But imagine having an invited guest in your house that you are particularly trying to impress. Imagine that you have just sat down at the table and the doorbell rings. You answer it, and in walks someone everyone at your table knows by way of scandalous rumors, and he goes to your guest of honor and begins to confess everything he's done wrong and asks your guest of honor to forgive him. As everyone fidgets in their chairs, the uninvited guest begins to give your guest of honor a backrub while telling your guest, and everyone else in the room, all of the things he has done wrong over the years. Is there any one among us who would not feel at least a little uncomfortable, perhaps embarrassed, if not angry? But what would you think if your guest of honor not only encouraged the uninvited guest to continue, but gave him his undivided attention, taking attention away from you, your other invited guests, and the meal which you have worked hard on and which is now getting cold!

In the Gospels every meal where Jesus is present represents the Eucharist. In

the story we have heard today Jesus has entered into the house of a Pharisee and is reclining at the table. He may even be in the Pharisee's house as the guest of honor. The Pharisee treats the woman who is a "known" sinner as an uninvited guest. When Jesus is challenged by the Pharisee for allowing this woman to be so physical with him, Jesus names the hypocrisy of the Pharisee. The real problem the Pharisee has with Jesus is that by ignoring the boundaries of the social convention of the time, Jesus has taken over the role of headship at the meal. It is no longer the Pharisee who presides at his own table, but Jesus.

While I know most of us are pretty well insulated from the uproar taking place in the worldwide Anglican Communion, if not completely bored by it, there are some developments taking place which seem strikingly similar.

Over the past few weeks the Archbishop of Canterbury has sent out invitations to the once every ten years gathering of all the bishops of the Anglican Communion known as the Lambeth Conference. He has invited all of the bishops of The Episcopal Church except for Gene Robinson, a gay man and the Bishop of New Hampshire. There are some bishops who are so outraged that The Episcopal Church has ordained a gay man to be bishop that they not only want Bishop Robinson excluded from Anglican gatherings, they want all of those who supported him to be excluded as well. They want The Episcopal Church out of the Anglican Communion.

And yet, here's the irony; every gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person who has come to a Church where I have been serving has come with a desire to lead a faithful life in relationship with God. Furthermore, time and again, these folks who have decided to become part of a parish where I have been serving have expressed a desire to have a relationship with one other person that is faithful, monogamous and lifelong. They have come eschewing promiscuity and hedonism and desire the help of the Church to have lives of integrity, very much in the same way straight couples come to the Church looking to get married. They have come in the same spirit that the woman in today's story came; mindful of God's forgiveness of their sins and wishing to show Jesus their love.

In today's Collect we have prayed for God's household the Church. Many

years ago I did some word study that I have recalled as I have been thinking about this Collect. For example, the word parish is a contraction in Greek of para-near and oika-house. The literal meaning of parish is near house. Well, I very much like the idea of the parish being the near house of God. But it gets better. The word diocese comes from dia-oiken, which literally means complete house. Wonderful, the diocese is a complete household of God consisting of the laos, the people of God, complete with the three orders of ministry that serve within the laos, bishops, deacons and priests. When you have a diocese you get a complete household of God. A Cathedral is a place specially designated to be the gathering place for a complete household of God, just as we did a week ago yesterday when this place was full for the ordinations of new deacons and a priest by our bishop.

But there is more. The word ecumenical comes from oikou-mene, or whole house. This helps us recover the original use of the word ecumenical, which does not really mean interdenominational, but refers to the whole household of God.

This word study neatly ties together how we in the church are in relationship with each other. A parish is a near house of God, within a diocese which is a complete house of God, within the ecumenical Church which is the whole house of God. The Preamble to the Constitution of The Episcopal Church puts it this way.

“The Episcopal Church is a constituent member of the Anglican Communion, a Fellowship within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Dioceses, Provinces, and regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury.”

And yet, the presence of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people is provoking people to enter into power struggles around the Anglican Communion. The power struggles that are now taking place are about ownership; ownership of property and assets, ownership of the truth, ownership of the Gospel, ownership of God’s house. Sadly, there is far more eco-logy, or house-talk, than theo-logy, or God-talk, in most of these arguments.

All of which prompts me to wonder, “do those bishops who want to cease

being in Communion with The Episcopal Church somehow believe that The Episcopal Church is no longer within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; the Ecumenical Church, the whole house of God? Do they believe that sinners can't be the Church? Have they forgotten their sins? Or do they, like the Pharisee, pretend they are without sin?"

The Pharisee, as a Jew, should have remembered that all he has is from God, and that his house was really a gift from God, and therefore, God's house. At the most, he had the privilege and responsibility of managing his house on God's behalf. And isn't it interesting that the word eco-nomy comes from oikos-nomos, and literally means house management. As laity, bishops, deacons and priests we are all charged with being eco-nomists of God's house, even as we are given various responsibilities within the household.

As today's Gospel reminds us, chief among these responsibilities is welcoming sinners, and forgiving them, and inviting them to the feast.

But there is more to being a near house, or complete house or even a whole house of God than welcoming sinners. As one surveys the cultural landscape one has to ask, "How can a parish claim to be a near house of God if the neighborhood in which the parish is located is not served and transformed by the parish?" And at the same time a parish can claim to be a near house of God when the neighborhood around the parish has changed and yet people have continued to gather and keep the parish going through efforts which are sometimes heroic. "How can a diocese claim to be a complete house of God if it focuses on those towns, suburbs and exurbs that are growing and have prosperity, while ignoring, neglecting and being blind to the poorest communities within the boundaries of the diocese?" And at the same time a diocese can be a complete house of God if it addresses the real spiritual hunger that exists in those very towns, suburbs and exurbs precisely because they are growing with transient people who are looking for holy ground on which they can stand. "How can the Ecumenical Church claim to be the whole house of God if it denies full participation in the Church to any one the basis of race, sex, ethnic origin or sexual orientation?" And at the same time the Ecumenical Church can claim to be the whole house of God if it honors the heart of the scriptures and ancient traditions that have been defining marks of Christianity for over 2,000 years. "How can the Ecumenical Church claim to

be the whole house of God if it ignores the cries of the poorest in the world, or remains silent in the face of global conflict and warfare, or fails to address global climate change caused by human indifference and greed?” And at the same time the Ecumenical Church can claim to be the whole house of God if it is trying to address the economic, social and material crisis of the dwindling middle class in the developed world of the Northern Hemisphere.

Any house of God can only claim to be so by including everyone at the table, by the grace of God, and in the belief that’s God’s mission, and thus God’s Church, is not yet complete. Jesus reveals that God’s mission is to invite all those to the banquet who are uninvited by the world, and to invite those who have positions of privilege in the world. All are invited to God’s table, rich and poor, black and white, men and women, urban and suburban, righteous and unrighteous. Jesus calls all to be in relationship with him and with each other, and we dare not define our relationship with him by deciding others are not in relationship with him.

This day let us remember that every near house, complete house and whole house is God’s house, and with God presiding all are welcomed and embraced with the words, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Let us pray,

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.