

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Trinity, June 21, 2009

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Today's gospel (Luke 16:16f.) is about God's judgment. Certain people did not respond to God's invitation. As a consequence, they were forever cut off from God's feast.

We can briefly summarize the parable. The certain man who made the supper is God. The invited guests are the people of Israel. The servant is Jesus. He came to say it was time for the people to repent and come, but the people continued with business as usual. So God invited the outcasts of Israel and the Gentiles to take their place. Then he proclaimed that none of the first invited guests would ever be given a place at his table.

Where do we fit into the parable? We are those in the highways and hedges. We are part of the mission to the Gentiles that began when Israel rejected Jesus. However, we cannot ignore the warning the parable gives to the first invited guests, for we are like them in significant ways.

The invited guests were religious people. They were about the business of going to synagogue and temple and doing the things that the Law of Moses said to do. However, when Jesus came as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, the people rejected him and continued with their lives as they were.

For the most part, we were born into a country that assumes some kind of faith in God. When surveys are taken, up to 75% of people say they believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Yet, do we come when Jesus calls *us*?

In his ministry in Israel, Jesus went about telling people to "Follow me." In a nation that saw itself as God's chosen people, Jesus went about personalizing the invitation. In order to follow him, each person had to make a decision.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit works in a similar manner among us. In the midst of a large population that sees itself as having faith in God, the Holy Spirit personalizes the invitation, calling each one of us to follow Jesus by living in a new way.

It is significant that the excuses weren't even what we think of as sin: people were newly married, had acquired property, equipment. If any of us had a dinner party, we would certainly excuse someone who was on a honeymoon. The point is that many people refuse to follow Jesus, not because of flagrant sin, but because their lives are centered on other things.

Many people see faith as a useful add-on to life. That is, we have our work, family and recreation and then we top it all off with a little bit of God. Faith in God is found to be helpful so long, of course, as it does not ask us to change anything in the other areas of life.

But further clarification is needed, for even if we do begin to follow Jesus we will still have marriages, work and property. It is not a simple either/or. Nor is it merely a reversal of priority so that we now say, "God is first, my family is second, my work is third," and so forth. That is to make God one item on a list that competes with family and work.

The correct model is to say that Jesus must be at the center of all things. Whether it is family, work

or play, Jesus is the Lord of each and every area of life. I must not let any aspect of life become its own end, for that is idolatry.

Following Christ does not mean running away from every other thing; following Christ means that Christ is at the center, and every other aspect of life is lived in service to him. When Jesus calls us to the feast, he does not usually call to leave our job or family. Rather he will call us to serve him in new ways in the various areas of life.

Thus, St. Paul says that we should only marry someone who is of the faith. We must not unite ourselves with one who would draw us away from Christ. Nor should we allow a spouse to lead us into unfaithfulness. Likewise, we must only engage in occupations that are consistent with our faith. Being faithful in work does not mean handing out tracts in the coffee room; being faithful means doing something that is good, and doing that good thing well.

The invitation we receive may be a call to change our attitude or behavior within some significant area of life. It may be a call to shake up the unfaithful status quo and think or act in new ways.

Spiritual disciplines are also a significant way we respond to the call. Gathering around the altar with the body of Christ on the Lord's Day is a way that we begin our time in Christ. Our habits of daily prayer are a foundation upon which the rest of our life is built. Tithing is a way that even our money is made to serve him. A commitment to these and other spiritual disciplines puts Christ at the center and puts the other aspects of our life in their right place in relationship to him.

The inability or unwillingness to establish disciplines around which the rest of life is ordered is a red flag that indicates that something like the excuses in the parable might be going on in our lives. It is significant, for example, if we never find time for prayer because other urgencies always pull us away—"because I have bought a piece of ground and must needs go and see it."

I said that this is a parable of judgment. This parable illustrates that God's judgment is not an arbitrary sentence handed down out of the blue on the last day. Rather, God's judgment is the confirmation of our answer to his invitation. Jesus, the Son of God and Lord of all, calls each person to repent, believe and change. The judgment of the last day will simply reveal the commitments we have made in this life in response to his call.

This highlights the importance of responding faithfully when the Holy Spirit speaks the Word of God to our hearts in each specific circumstance of life. As Psalm 95 says, "Today if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." We cannot continue with business as usual when God calls us to do new things. We must "Come, for all things are now ready."

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