

Exploring the Scriptures:
Sabbath Supper

August 29, 2010 Luke 14:1-14
by Blair Odney

I sometimes wonder what Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees and the scribes would have been had they not been so threatened by his insights. What might it have been like if both had been through the refining fires of life, and ended up privileged enough to enjoy their retirement, rocking in their rockers beneath an olive tree remembering the heady days of the early first century. Would they find common ground? Would they laugh at their zeal? Would they be so invested in their respective political and economic positions? Or would they be open to the wisdom of each other, open to the wonderings of aging men, curious to the questions of idealistic young people who like them so long ago, are eager to fix the wrongs they see?

This idea comes to me often when I gather with the group who has coffee every Thursday at Waves. This week there were four people under 25, and at least two people over 75, and about 6 of us somewhere in between. What I notice as I work and serve among you is that it's the folks in their 40s to 70s who have the most difficulty letting go of the way we do things around here. And I have a confession; I'm one of those guilty middle agers. When someone suggests to me that there are different ways to think of baptism (you've already heard me preach about this one) or different ways to think about the nature of God, or different ways to bring about change, my thinking gets challenged and I forget to open my heart and my mind. In my zeal to make good on my commitments to lead you, I sometimes forget to be open to the leading of the Spirit that may come in the wisdom and good ideas of others.

The ones under 25 are wonderfully idealistic, hopeful, energetic, open to relationships, and eager to make change, but only where they think they can. It's the ones over 80 who are most open to wherever the discussion and the future of the church might go. For them, gone is the posturing, and positioning. Gone is the fretting over theological blacks and whites. Gone is the worry about whether we should make this move or that.

Each and every time I suggest an outlandish idea, or wonder about a ministry program, or make a suggestion for an alternative worship, one of these octogenarians says "you won't know if it will work unless you try." They don't get fussed over the what-ifs. They don't fret over who might leave if we make a change. Their faith in the resilience of our community and the creative genius of Spirit working keeps them quite curious and open to whatever might come our way. Even this past Thursday, one such older person who'd never been to waves before noticed how different our gathering was, how inclusive, how freely the dialogue flowed and how hopeful she felt for the future. I could almost hear her think: "We've never done it like this before – hallelujah!"

I wonder if this might be where the Pharisees and Jesus would have been led, had the events of Palm Sunday, and the overturning the tables of the money changers and the cursing of the fig tree not gone the way they did; had the Pharisees not got so scared and threatened. We know they conspired to have Jesus crucified.

But it might have ended very differently had Jesus not been crucified. You see, it was the Pharisees with whom Jesus had the most in common. We forget that. Every time we read about the Pharisees and the scribes, we bristle and think: “bad guys, bad guys.” We forget that these would have been Jesus’ mentors, a relationship that began when he was 12. These are the ones with whom Jesus would have studied and worshipped, wrestling with the finer points of the Torah. These are the ones Jesus would have grown to love.

When we read scripture, we seem to be okay with him eating with the sinners and tax collectors...we know how the story goes...he’s supposed to do that. When we find Jesus dining with the Pharisees and the scribes, we think; what’s he doing eating with the enemy? We forget that dining with the scribes and Pharisees on the Sabbath would have been very common. And we know that the relationship was mutual. We know from the stories in John’s gospel that one of the head guys of the synagogue Nicodemus, loved Jesus. He came to Jesus at night to ask about being born of the Spirit. It was Nicodemus who received and embraced the nearly naked and tortured body of Jesus when they took it off the cross.

So what happened? What turned so wrong? How was it that the scribes and the Pharisees became so threatened that they turned on Jesus so decisively? I think this story, and in fact last week’s story of the bent over woman, tells us very clearly...it was Jesus uncanny ability to see. Jesus had the wisdom and the grace, the insight and the courage to look at the everyday ordinary events, and the seemingly faceless people of his culture and encourage others to see them in whole new ways. He was observant, insightful, and faithful to an understanding of the Torah the Pharisees had long forgotten. And it was this ability to really see, and really know, and really challenge the status quo that threatened the ones who taught him. It’s the apprentice becoming wiser than the mentor. It’s the student teaching the teacher.

Consider what happens; in the aftermath of healing the bent over woman in the synagogue, Jesus comes to dinner and remember what the text says: “they were watching him closely. ²Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy.” Just then, in front of him; do you see how Jesus is confronted...it’s like the guy is a plant. This is a set up to see how Jesus will respond. And the test is not lost on Jesus. He gets the bait. He knows what the scribes and the Pharisees are up to. He knows, as we do, that they’re testing him, and they want him to fail.

But just as masterfully, completely non-defensively, Jesus puts the ball in their court. I imagine him looking at them with love and knowing, remembering how the worship leader

in the morning bristled when he healed the bent over woman. He simply asks: "is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" They're stunned...they don't know what to say. They already know he's healed on the Sabbath earlier in the day. They already know the crowd was impressed. They also already know his logic...about the 7th day, the Shabbat. The Sabbath. Humankind was not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for humankind. In Jesus theology of the Sabbath, we do what we need to do to experience peace and rest. And let's be clear here, true Sabbath means that none of us can rest or be at peace until we all are. None of us lives well, until we all are living well. None of us experiences grace and wholeness until we all experience grace and wholeness.

In their stunned silence, Jesus heals the man of a condition that bloats him with water. It's like he is drowning in his own body fluids...his kidneys are simply not functioning. (I'd like to offer a side bar here for those who wonder about healing miracles. I have Level Two in Healing Touch. I know a technique, its called Magnetic Unruffling, that when administered, can help the kidneys and the bowel return to normal functioning.) So here we have a man with dropsy, drowning in his bodily fluids, and Jesus helps him – cures him -as the story goes. Jesus looks at the Pharisees and the scribes, the very ones he loves, the ones who have taught him and says: "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, (friends read here ... and is drowning) will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" Jesus simply did here, what they would have done; the detail is just a little different.

With this incident on his mind, Jesus looks at the table at which the guests begin to seat themselves according to rank and societal position. If you google first century dining you'll discover all the rules of who got to sit where in relation to the host. Once again, Jesus sees with a clarity that is lost on the Pharisees and the scribes. They'd forgotten what they learned in Hebrew school...from the law and the prophets. Jesus had reminded them in the early days of his ministry when he read from the prophet Isaiah "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed and to declare the year of Jubilee."

Here, at this banquet, he reminds the Pharisees again. When you see the world through rank and position, you will not see the very ones who stand before you, like the one with dropsy who just appeared before me. When you have a dinner party, don't invite those like you, your family, your colleagues. They will always repay you...it's the social order. It's easy to be in the company of the like minded. Instead, invite the poor, the oppressed, the lame and the blind. I would add, invite the refugee, and the aids victim, the sex trade worker and the mentally ill, the physically handicapped and the resident of the downtown eastside. They will never be able to repay. But they will have touched the hem of his garment, seated at the table where all are welcome and that makes all the difference. Then true Sabbath can begin to be known in our world. May it be so. Amen.