

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF GETHSEMANE

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Sermon for 01 September 2013

The Rev. Theo Park

This morning's passage from Proverbs
has got to be the shortest reading in the lectionary!
Man...blink and you missed it.
And yet Jesus evidently paid great attention to this pithy little saying, or one like it.
Of course, at the same time Jesus turns the saying on its head,
but then this is what we expect of him.

It must have seemed like such a great idea.
The Pharisees invite Jesus over for dinner thinking, no doubt,
that they could humble him.
That is surely what is meant by the words, "they were watching him."
You know, they're going to knock him down a few pegs.
Expose him for the fraud he must surely be.
It would be the only way to stop those crowds from following him around;
those scruffy, dirty, filthy crowds of little people.

What the upright religious community would learn—
what the guardians of such fine things as virtue, character, and values were to learn—
is that you cannot humble one who chooses to humble himself.

And what a rude guest he turns out to be.
Would any of us really welcome such a man?
A man who comes into the house and proceeds to lecture your other guests?
There they were, leaning their chairs up against the table
to be sure they would be able to sit where and with whom they wished—
the people they ought to sit with and so on—
and Jesus lambastes them for what is surely natural human behavior.

Then when Jesus is finished with the guests,
he lectures his host about the guest list itself.
Don't invite your friends, brothers, kinsmen, neighbors and the like.
Invite those without the power and without the resources
to reciprocate your hospitality in any way at all.

What kind of guest is this, anyway?
I suspect that dinners in most of our homes look a lot more
like dinner with the Pharisees than anything Jesus seems to have in mind.
Imagine him arriving at a parish potluck

and pulling back all the chairs that have been placed against the tables
and lecturing everyone left and right about not saving places.
And then telling us to go over to the Drake
to find some poor (literally) strangers to have a feast on our tab.
It's rather overwhelming.
More than just a few of us would be upset if not down right mad at this behavior!
It is clear from this encounter that meals with Jesus are not going to be
nice, mannerly, carefully arranged events.
And based on the readings of the last couple of weeks
he probably isn't just talking about dinner parties.
At least not as he is portrayed in Luke.

I don't know about you, but this is the Jesus who haunts my more reflective moments. The one
who looms over my shoulder when someone turns up at the door
looking for help with the rent or groceries or a tank of gas
and I say "No" and then return at the end of the day
to my well-appointed 22nd floor condominium overlooking the river.
It doesn't matter that I really have no ready money,
either in my church or personal account.
It doesn't matter that I know that some of these stories are scams
or at least that some of those asking make a living doing this.
It doesn't matter that I am already known on the circuit as a sure soft touch.
I hear Jesus saying, "Invite the anawim, the outcast and the destitute,
those who are dependent on God alone. Whatever you do for them, you do for me." And I look at
my behavior and I cringe.
I can't say that I have an answer for the social ills of our world.
I don't presume to tell you what to do.
But I certainly have an opinion about what Jesus would have me do. And it isn't easy. Perhaps
that's as much as can be expected of us, at least to start with:
that we feel the discomfort and shine its light on our choices and actions.

Robert Coles, author of *The Spiritual Lives of Children*, among other things,
tells a story about his first encounter with the great social reformer Dorothy Day,
who was living and working with the poor in the slums of New York City.
Coles was in Harvard Medical School at the time, studying to be a psychiatrist,
proud of his status, and also proud that he had volunteered
to work with Dorothy Day in helping the poor.
He arrived for his first meeting to discover Day sitting at a table,
deep in conversation with a very disheveled street person.
She didn't notice Coles had come into the room
until they had finished their conversation.
Then she asked, "Do you want to speak to one of us?"
Robert Coles was astounded by Day's humility.
She had identified so completely with a so-called "nobody"
as to remove all distinction between them. Coles said it changed his life.
He said he learned more in that moment than in his four years at Harvard.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.
In this statement, we hear a great truth about humility.
In emptying ourselves, we will find fulfillment.
In humbling ourselves, we will be exalted.
In a culture that prizes “the secrets of highly successful people”
and urges us to “awaken our inner giant,” this sounds rather counterintuitive.
But is it true? Is Jesus right?
Does Dorothy Day indeed point us to the truth of Jesus’ statement?
Let’s submit this statement to the test of human experience.
Can we walk through life on a perpetual high?
Once we have found fulfillment, do we live from that place from then on?
Or does the universe have a way of knocking us off our perches and emptying us out?
Isn’t it more often like the latter than the former.
Even for those who have powerfully known and experienced
the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ,
who have known in our hearts and minds the peace of God that passes understanding, they have
also known the dark night of the soul and the fear and trembling of salvation.
Is this surprising? Disappointing? Should it be?
After all, when Jesus called his disciples
he didn’t promise them that they would be able to achieve anything in one year,
as a popular self-help book did not long ago.
Rather, he said, “Leave everything behind, follow me and be transformed.”
It seems that we are constantly moving back and forth
between emptiness and fulfillment, between humility and exaltation,
between death and resurrection.
Life still knocks the wind out of us.
The universe still reduces us to tears.
Death and loss still bring us to our knees.
But rather than try to awaken the giant or the hero within,
we who try to follow Christ are called to remember
the truth and the promise that all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

It is a paradox, really, that Jesus brings to the dinner table.
The people with whom Jesus identifies himself are those society judges to be misfits. Jesus says he
is the person who is poor. He is that person who is hungry.
He is that broken woman who has lived all those years with pain and rejection.
We recognize this every time we promise to seek and serve him in all persons,
to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Wouldn't it be simply fantastic if it turned out to be true?
Wouldn't it be absolutely extraordinary if we all discovered this?
Wouldn't the face of the world be changed?
If we could just become friends with the people Jesus befriended,
wouldn't we be blessed?