

“Where’s the Profit?”
September 2, 2007

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Nothing so exposes the fashionable stoicism of American faith – faith in a vague God who, though generally approving of human projects, neither speaks nor acts – as the notion that our God means to change us. Conversion is a radical assault upon the conventional, officially sanctioned American faith that we are basically OK just as we are, and that this world, for any of its faults, is all there is. Conversion is a statement of faith that this God means to have us – all of us – that this God will have God’s sovereign way with us.

-- William Willimon

Christianity is *not* for the faint of heart. It is not for anyone satisfied with the status quo, whether it’s the personal or the political status quo. And it is most definitely not for anyone who craves the approval of conventional culture or the false satisfaction of unending consumerism.

I keep getting subtle and not-so-subtle reminders of this reality. I keep being reminded that trying to be one of Jesus’ disciples is not a walk in the park. I’ll be reading or praying or talking with someone, and all of the sudden I’ll get a little clearer sense of how deeply countercultural the Christian life is meant to be. In the midst of my reading or musing, I’ll “get it” in a new way that those of us who are called to be Christian are called to live and witness to the truth that God is more real and more nourishing than what passes for the “good life” in contemporary America. And I’ll “get it” that, as Christians, we are called to live and witness to the truth that love is more powerful than anything else, more powerful than any gun, any bomb, any amount of money, any hatred, or any political scheming.

Let me name that dual calling again. We are called to live and trust the truth that God is more real than anything we can know or imagine, and we are called to live and trust the truth that love is more powerful than anything we can know or imagine.

In this morning’s opening words, William Willimon understands this dual calling as a radical assault on what he calls the conventional, officially sanctioned American faith. Willimon issues a warning that accepting the call to follow Jesus means surrendering to a God who means to have all of who and what we are, a God whose claim on us is limitless, and Willimon warns us that accepting that call will place us outside the mainstream of American culture. (And I would add that accepting that call will place us in the company of our sisters and brothers of other faiths who are also outside mainstream culture. We’ll be in the company of Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Native Americans, and others, and we’ll all learn from one another about the spirit and truth that Christians know as “God.”)

This week, the stark reminder of the demands of Christianity and its radical assault on conventional American faith comes from Jeremiah, who speaks to both Jews and Christians, and from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Jeremiah addresses the people of ancient Israel and the people of our day, and he names what seems to be an enduring truth . . . that, despite being created and blessed by the God who is both liberator and source of living water, we human folk turn away from God, time and time again, seeking worthless things and creating lives that waste the living water that God has given us.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is speaking in the language of banquets and dinner invitations. In the parable of the wedding banquet, he reminds us that being invited to the banquet – being invited into life by a God of endless grace and love – is such a rich gift, such an abundant blessing that there is no need try to get to the head of the line, to get the best table, to grab the most prominent seat. He’s teaching us that a greedy, me-first approach has no place in God’s banquet hall, no place in God’s vision for us and for all of creation.

Then Jesus, being Jesus, brings his teaching down to earth. He speaks, not of God’s banquet, but of human banquets and meals. He warns us away from a way of life oriented toward profiting ourselves; he warns us away from a life rooted in the question, “What’s in it for me?” And then he tells us, when we open our homes and our lives, to open them not to those who can repay us in kind, but to the poor, the lame, and the blind. He calls us to open our hearts, our homes, and our very selves to the outcast, to those who have been left behind in an every man for himself culture, and to those who may make us uncomfortable by calling our sense of entitlement into question.

Can you hear that dual calling I mentioned earlier? Do you hear the Christian calling to live and trust the truths that God is more real and love is more powerful than anything we can know or imagine? In dramatic, challenging, and, ultimately, pleading language, Jeremiah reminds anyone who will listen that God is the source of all that we need and that God is the guide who has, time and time again, led us from bondage into freedom, from despair into hope, from hatred into love. And Jeremiah reminds us that every time we turn from that sacred source of life and blessing, we are digging a hole for ourselves, a cistern that cannot hold the living water of love and grace. Every time we turn our backs on who and what God calls us to be, we dig a hole that will remain forever empty, no matter how much of what we create and what we crave we put into it.

Do you hear how countercultural this message is? What a radical assault it is on conventional wisdom and the status quo? What a radical, countercultural assault it is on a people like us, here in 21st century America, a people who are intoxicated with our own power. Make no mistake, as a people, we are intoxicated with the power of force and violence, with the desire for economic power, and with the desire for political power. We are enthralled with our own power to create things – from fast powerful cars to the latest entertainment technology to cloned animals. We are a people addicted to always wanting and having more – more things, more exciting experiences, more importance. We are a people obsessed with ourselves, with finding the perfect exercise program and buying our way to the perfect nose, the sexiest lips, the most alluring breasts, the most wrinkle-free faces. We are, in Jeremiah’s words, a people who go after things that do not profit, who have exchanged the enduring beauty and power of being beloved creations of God for the warped beauty and the destructive power of believing we are the center of the universe and can create ourselves and our lives.

Jesus' message this morning is no less blunt. By asking us to imagine that we live our lives in the framework of a wedding banquet, he is telling us that the thing that matters is that we have been invited to the banquet, period. We do not need to worry about getting ahead, about who's on first, or about being more – or less – important than anyone else. Jesus joins Jeremiah in telling us that being invited to the banquet and being offered the fountain of living water is *enough*. We don't need to grab more for ourselves, either by claiming a place of honor or by digging out cisterns to try to hold more water than we need. They are both telling us that our invitation into God's banquet and the gift we receive of God's living waters are more than enough. We do not need to seek to profit ourselves by creating our own empires or glory or protection or luxury or self-importance.

Jesus is trying, as he tried throughout his ministry, to tell us that our importance, our value, and our worth all rest in the importance, value, and worth that all people and all creation share. He is calling us not to let ourselves be trapped in the hell of believing that God's universe is a zero-sum game, where one person's importance and value rest on someone else's *lack* of importance and value.

He is also warning us of the emptiness that will engulf our lives if we open our hearts, homes, and wallets only to those people who can repay us. He's warning us of the nightmare we will become if we spend our time and our money only on what we think will bring us a profit. In his time and place, it was a shocking thing to tell someone to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind for a meal. He was listing the outcast, the rejected, the scorned, and the feared, and he was telling his host and all who could hear him to welcome those people into their hearts and homes.

I've tried to translate Jesus' guest list into an equivalent list for us here in Sonoma in the year 2007, and here's what I think Jesus would say. When you give a banquet, when you give of yourselves through time, effort, and money, invite the poor; invite the drug addicted; invite the homeless; invite the undocumented worker and his or her family; invite the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered person who still hears, over and over again, that queer people are perverted, disordered, and most definitely not welcome in church. Invite the people whose very lives call your deepest assumptions about yourself and the world into question, and you will know you have invited some of God's precious and beloved people to your table.

So how would the conversation go if Jeremiah and Jesus knocked on your door and asked you how you're doing with trusting God's living water instead of your own cracked cisterns ... if they asked how you're doing with simply showing up as a guest at God's holy banquet of life and not trying to grab the best seat ... and if they asked how you're doing with your own guest lists? Well, to take the last question first, I can tell you it would be a brief, uncomfortable conversation, because I haven't had any dinner guests for a long time! But if you and I understand Jesus' teaching as reaching beyond the literal dinner table and into the broader question of whom we invite into our circle of concern, our circle of giving, and our circle of love, we are faced with the deeper question of whom we include and whom we exclude from those circles.

And that deeper question takes me back to where I started this sermon ... to how demanding and countercultural Christianity can be. Whether it's in our daily lives, our politics, or our economic choices, God in and through Jesus calls us to recognize and trust that the gift and blessing we receive from God are more real and more valuable than

anything we can hold, control, or create ourselves. In a time and place intoxicated with the lure of power and wealth, this is a radical calling. No less radical is God's call in and through Jesus to recognize and trust that love is more powerful and more resilient than all the things we grasp to protect ourselves, to promote ourselves, and to profit ourselves. In a time and place suspicious and resentful of foreigners, a time and place fearful of strangers and the future, and a time and place often willfully ignorant of the needs of our brothers and sisters imprisoned by poverty and injustice, this is a radical calling, indeed.

My beloved friends, in the days and weeks ahead, stay open to the call into a faithful life, with God at the center and love radiating in all directions. When the call seems too demanding, feel free to pause and say to God, in your own words, "Are you kidding me? You can't be serious!" Listen for the response that comes, and don't be too surprised if what comes is simply the words Jesus said to his disciples so many times: "Follow me."

We have been given a guide; we have been given companions for the journey; and we have been reassured of God's everlasting love and forgiveness, no matter how many times we fall flat on our faces as we travel. We have been called on a glorious journey that is as full of blessings as it is of challenges, so let's get moving.

Amen.

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