

Pentecost III (C)  
*I Kings 21.1-19/ Galatians 6.2-21/ Luke 7.36-8.3*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
17 June 2007

“WHOSE TABLE? WHOSE FOOD?”

~Paul H. Friesen~

This morning we are confronted three times, by our three Scriptures, with three stories about conflict—conflict between truth spoken about God's gifts to humanity (on the one hand) and how they were possessed (on the other hand). But these are not abstract debates with general theological conclusions. They are each a well-known story in which conflict between the characters revealed the truth.

What caused the conflict was straightforward: in the first case it was an argument about who had the rights to a vineyard, and in the other two it was an argument about who had a right to have fellowship around the same dining room table. We might say that it's all about owning crops and sharing food.

In the ancient Hebrew story we meet Ahab and Jezebel and Elijah—again. Here is the truth. In ancient Israelite law, the land, like all of God's natural world, was the Lord's. Land granted to a clan by God, like the clan of Naboth of Jezreel, was a divine gift, and could never be taken from it. The clan was the custodian of the land on behalf of the Lord. Even if the land was given up over time for money to relieve the poverty of a clan, the land was meant to return every fifty years to the clan, by the law of Jubilee. Ancestral lands could never really be sold—if they left the hands of their clan they could in effect only be leased for a while.<sup>1</sup>

Here is the politics. Ahab the King reigned from his palace in Samaria. But he had a nice summer house in Jezreel. He fancied Naboth's vineyard next door—he wanted to possess it outright. But he knew the law, so he moped about, depressed that his ambitions were defeated by a wealthy neighbour. Naboth was no doubt ready for him. Because when the nation of Israel had clamoured for a King a few generations earlier, a warning had come from the old prophet Samuel: 'Do you want a king like the other nations? 'He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards.'<sup>2</sup>

Jezebel, influenced by the absolute dictatorship of her father, King of Phoenicia, mocked her husband's legal, biblical limitations and set out to

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<sup>1</sup> See Jerome T. Walsh, *Brit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry: I Kings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), p.317-318.

<sup>2</sup> *I Samuel* 8.14. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise. The full objection to monarchy is found in 8.1-22.

show him how to rule as a tyrant. She issued orders on his behalf, framed Naboth for blasphemy, and had him executed, with the full co-operation of the city council of Jezreel. She knew full well that execution for a capital offence such as this meant that one's property was taken from one's clan because it was forfeited to the King. But the story can't end here. As Ahab stood by his vineyard for the first time his downfall had already begun. God would not tolerate the politics of the royal household, so he sent Elijah to speak the truth about God's world, and God's gifts of the world's lands to all of his children.<sup>3</sup>

For Christians, the table is as sacred as the land was to ancient Israel—the Lord's Table and our dining room tables.

It is not surprising we get this conviction from the Gospels, as the Gospels are full of stories about the tables at which Jesus eats. Jesus is accused a number of times of eating and drinking with 'tax collectors and sinners'. There are four gospel stories alone about women, uninvited, slipping into dinners to sit at Jesus' feet. There are three stories in Luke's *Gospel* alone about Jesus accepting dinner invitations from leading Pharisees.<sup>4</sup>

One missionary- priest-scholar has described this morning's Gospel scene in these words:

*The woman's position 'behind [Jesus] at his feet' is easy to picture in the case of a formal dinner at which the guests 'reclined.' The low tables would have been arranged in a horseshoe shape, with the fourth side of the...square open to allow servants access to the tables. The guests would be reclining on cushions, propped on their left elbows, using their right hands to reach the food that was on the table. Their feet would be curled behind them, pointing away from the tables. The guests would be barefoot, having removed their sandals upon entering the room, and presumably having been provided with a basin and towel with which to wash their feet. In the case of highly honoured guests, a servant would be assigned to wash the guest's feet. Usually only the lowliest of the servants would be assigned such a menial task. In extreme cases, the host might perform it himself, in order to demonstrate his respect for and devotion to the guest. The woman in this story, in effect, takes on the role of such a host, for she does not act under orders as a servant would, but moved by her own emotions.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> See Leo L. Honor, *Jewish Commentary for Bible Readers: Book of Kings I* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1955), p. 298; Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Anselm Hagedorn (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p.212-213; See Jerome T. Walsh, *Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry: 1 Kings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), p.317-318.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel for the Third World: Volume Two-B* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), p.76, 87.

<sup>5</sup> As described in Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel*, p.88.

Who was the host? Who was the woman?

The host at this post-synagogue service dinner (so it seems),<sup>6</sup> was meant to be Simon, we hear. He was a Pharisee, the Jewish religious group to which Jesus was most closely connected. The Pharisees were reformers, who hoped for the conversion of Israel into a holy nation, a righteous nation based on God's justice. Like the first Protestants of the sixteenth century, and like the first Evangelical Anglicans of the eighteenth century, the Pharisees wanted to preach the truth about human sinfulness and God's goodness. But like the Protestants and the Evangelical Anglicans of later years, the Pharisees sometimes slipped into hypocrisy. They confused their agenda with God's ways on the one hand, and God's holiness with their own holiness on the other hand. This seemed to be the case with Simon. And so the early church treasured the story about the woman.

Who was the woman? The truth is, we don't know. Most women at dinners in the pagan Roman world were prostitutes or mistresses of important guests. But this was a Pharisees' dinner in a Pharisee's house. Simon wasn't likely to have invited such—but the woman wasn't an official guest. In fact the crowds pressed in around the house at these dinners, like the *paparazzi* at a Hollywood restaurant today. The doors (and windows) were often left open at ancient dinners, and for Simon—well, Jesus was a good dinner guest to catch. Jesus was for a while, the 'flavour of the day'. He was a bit strange, perhaps, risky even, but with Jesus in the house no one could say this Pharisee was uncharitable or irrelevant. Simon hadn't invited the woman, but once in the door he couldn't very kick her out, as Jesus didn't object to her.

Simon's table was meant to exclude the likes of the woman for whatever her sins, it was obvious to everyone there that her life was quite messed up—Jesus said it aloud. But Jesus spoke the truth about who was welcome at the table. In fact Jesus spoke the truth about who could welcome others to the table.

Jesus said: 'Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment'." The woman was at the table in truth, honouring the guest of honour. She had understood and confessed her sin in this act of worship, whereas Simon was too busy justifying himself, and his position at the table. As St. Ambrose put it: 'The sinful woman is glorified in the house of the sinner. The Pharisee did not believe, but the woman believed.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), p.308-309.

<sup>7</sup> In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 127.

And there were more like her, we hear at the end of the Gospel. There was Mary Magdalene a wealthy woman, formally possessed; Joanna, the wife of a palace official at Herod's palace, Herod whom the Pharisees despised for his pagan compromises—and Susanna and others. They supported Jesus and his disciples with money (this was not unheard of when it came to Rabbis and their supporters) but they also began to travel with Jesus (this was unheard of).<sup>8</sup>

It was as if Jesus and the women and the disciples became a kind of travelling dinner party, collecting whoever was willing to sit at the table with them.

The Apostle Paul, was a self-proclaimed Pharisee himself, both before and long after his conversion.<sup>9</sup> But St. Paul knew that the survival of the Christian Church, the identity of the church itself, hung on a shared table.

This is why the Apostle 'flew off the handle' in his letter to the Galatians. In those days the communal meal (the 'church pot-luck') and the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) were one and the same meal, eaten to feed both body and soul. So St. Paul caught the heresy soon after it broke out: *When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles...And the others...joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray...I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the Gospel.*

St. Peter, the 'rock of the church'? St. Barnabas, the 'son of encouragement'? They had missed the point of the Gospel?

Yes, they had, at this point. And in the mercy of God, St. Paul caught it in the nick of time. The church had started to segregate its fellowship along the old lines. But Jesus hadn't died so they could all go their own ways.

Most of us know that at large services in this parish, we need the use of two tables, two places to commune. But if he had fallen into the early heresy the Apostle nailed, we would have different tables, restricted to different sorts of people here. Those who had been born Anglicans would have one table, those who had been raised in other churches or no church would have a separate Lord's Table—or different tables would be based on education, or wealth, or particular jobs.

This contradicts, said St. Paul, 'the truth of the Gospel'. To fall into the trap against which Paul warned the Apostles and then the Galatians, would be to admit only certain kinds of people to our luncheons, or dinners, or homes. Though we are not good enough in our country at sharing our food beyond our borders, perhaps one of our problems is that it is easier to give food to people half way around the world than to invite someone very

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<sup>8</sup> As described in Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel*, p.111-114.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 22.3; 23.6

different than ourselves to the tables of the church or the tables of our homes, or the tables of cafés and restaurants down the street.

What is the 'truth of the Gospel'? The truth is there is no priority if you are a King, there is no priority if you are the right sort of person, there is no priority if you are the right kind of Christian. There is no leg up when it comes to the love of God, or true fellowship around the table of the Lord or any table. There is not Gospel Basic and then Gospel Special Edition!

The truth is that God has given to us his creatures, the gifts of this world to be shared. We don't own them, they are granted us to be shared. The truth is that all of us stand equally in the blessing and forgiveness God gave the sinful woman through Jesus, because she wasn't ashamed to ask for blessing and forgiveness. All of us need to sit around the same table.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, wouldn't the Gospel ring true if all sorts of people joined us around the Lord's Table? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the food on the Lord's Table was multiplied for us into gifts of food around the world? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we found ourselves, happily sitting with people we haven't sat with before, all because of the Gospel? The good news is that nothing need hold us back from this joy—the gift is in God's hand extended to us.