

Pentecost XIV  
*Jeremiah 2.1-13/Hebrews 13.1-16/Luke 14.1-14*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
2 September 2007

On Arguments

~Paul H. Friesen~

I was visiting with parishioners this week and after lunch we began talking about the small groups that will be set up for our parish study series this fall. They were both enthusiastic. He said: 'I love a good argument!' She said: 'Dear, I think you mean you love a good discussion.' He said, 'No, I love a good argument.'

I think I understand what they both meant. He meant that sometimes politeness needs to give away to vigorous exchanges about the strengths and weaknesses of claims about truth. She meant that the spirit of the conversation should always reveal mutual respect.

This takes us to the threshold of today's Gospel. It's a story about Jesus and his critics. They have a history by this point in the *Gospel According to St. Luke*. In fact it was revealed in last week's Gospel, taken from the previous chapter of *Luke*. There Jesus and his critics had tangled over what could or could not be done in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. At the end of the exchange we hear this: 'His opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at the wonderful things that [Jesus] was doing.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke 13.17*. All biblical quotations in this sermon are from the *New Revised Standard Version*. All together there are four Lucan passages about healing on the Sabbath: *Luke 4.31-37*; *6.6-11*; *13.10-17*; *14.1-14*. All but the first involve controversy.

Today's story begins with the words, 'On one occasion...' So it's not clear when it happened. But for the author, the collector of stories about Jesus, it obviously serves as 'round two' to last Sunday's 'round one.' We are not surprised that Jesus and his critics are about to have another discussion—or an argument.

The story, like many Gospel stories, takes place during a dinner. This one takes place after a synagogue service, much like the dinners that will follow church services today throughout our city. Jesus has accepted the hospitality a local dignitary, either an elder of the synagogue or a leader of the Pharisees.

Though Jesus is surrounded by critics, the invitation was not itself surprising because of the importance of hospitality in the ancient world, both Jewish and Roman. The Romans, who had invaded Israel, had stories about the gods disguised as wayfarers in need of meals and lodging, some of them about Zeus, stories inherited from the Greeks.

But the ancient Jews had their own traditions about hospitality, such as the saying that circulated in Israel: 'There are six things the fruit of which a man eats in this world, and by which is horn is raised in the world to come...[The first is] hospitality to the stranger and visiting the sick.'<sup>2</sup> Abraham's legendary invitation to the three angelic travellers was likely behind this saying.<sup>3</sup>

So the author of *Hebrews* reminds the early Jewish-Christian church of this as well: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it...Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.'

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Toronto: Welch, 1976), p.190-191.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis* 18.1-9.

But it is obvious from the beginning of the Gospel story, that this episode of hospitality has an edge. The dinner is crowded with Jesus' critics. Who were these critics? The religious world of Jesus' day was divisive, like our own world today.

There were the *Saducees*. This group included the priestly families that ran the temple in Jerusalem and the nobility of the nation and also their supporters and admirers. They were quite friendly to the Roman occupiers of their nation, and advised compromise with them, as long as the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem were allowed and the temple was respected. They didn't like the idea of Jesus upsetting the *status quo* and attracting the attention of their Roman overlords. Remember, it was a Roman judicial system that finally ensnared Jesus, and a Roman execution that killed him, in the midst of Roman guards.

These *Saducees* were opposed by several Jewish religious reform movements from whom they distanced themselves. Those sometimes called *Zealots* in the Scriptures were freedom fighters that encouraged armed uprisings against the Romans. They believed they walked in the footsteps of the Maccabees who had revolted against the earlier occupying forces of the neighbouring nations in the chaos that followed the death of Alexander the Great. The way of the Zealots led to the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 a.d. and the final massacre at Masada. But Jesus didn't counsel violent uprisings.

It is believed there were various other reform groups whom scholars sometimes call *Essenes*-- who collected what are called 'the Dead Sea Scrolls.' The *Essenes*, or whatever they called themselves, were fervent believers who withdrew from society like monks and attempted to live blameless lives while they waited for the Lord to return and judge the world with fire. It is sometimes believed that John the Baptist was associated with

them. But Jesus wouldn't withdraw—he insisted on being in the thick of the complications of public life.

Finally, there were the *Pharisees*, the group to whom, in fact, Jesus was most closely associated. Their hero was Ezra, the scribe, who had taught the people the law when they had returned from exile in Babylon centuries earlier. The Pharisees' spiritual home was in the synagogues that Jesus frequented. They urged the general population to obey the Law of Moses so that God would be pleased with their obedience and give the nation back to them from the Romans. The Pharisees provided many detailed interpretations of the Law so that the uneducated masses could know how to be obedient. Jesus, like the leaders of the Pharisees, was seen to be a teacher, a Rabbi.

But though they shared many of the same beliefs, Jesus had not trained with the leaders of the Pharisees. In fact Jesus insisted, more and more, that he was speaking with the voice of God like a prophet of old. And so he argued for obedience to the spirit of the Law, not just the letter. So Jesus argued that sinners should be embraced before they had proved their repentance was sincere, not after. Pharisees thought all this was dangerous. They resented Jesus' growing popularity. And they were scandalized when Jesus began teaching that he, himself, was the living word of God, the voice of God in the flesh like no prophet before, the one to usher in the eternal Kingdom of God.

And so their meetings became volatile. And here, this morning, we catch them at the same dinner. At first Jesus' critics take the offensive. Then Jesus takes the initiative. The story as a whole reveals a debate with two points of view, which is remarkable because Jesus' critics don't utter one word from beginning to end.

As Jesus enters the house the debate begins. We hear that the critics are ‘watching him closely’ as he is about to enter the door. This is the attitude of those who set out to accuse and lack only the occasion to do it. Their mind is already made up. And the occasion is so close at hand everyone can feel it. It was a Sabbath, and the man approaching Jesus for healing was a man with dropsy, swelling, water retention, seen as a punishment for sin.<sup>4</sup>

Would Jesus dare to work on the Sabbath? Would he heal this sinner? The accusation in their eyes is unmistakable. They would like nothing better than to close down Jesus before he opens his mouth.

Jesus sees it all in their faces and asks: ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ They are shamed into silence. And then he cites the Law about rescuing a child or an ox from a well—didn’t the Law recommend works of redemption on the Sabbath? And so the silence thickens—the scene is frozen. The critics have been caught in their irrelevance by their brittle minds and minute regulations.

The argument is over. Or is it? Not for Jesus!

After the silence, Jesus takes the initiative. The scene ‘un-freezes’. The guests at the dinner proceed from the doorway to their seats at the dinner. Jesus doesn’t begin in hostility. He does not prejudge the critics. But he notices something in the behaviour of the guests which causes him to comment. Why had they elbowed their way to the closest seats to the host, rather than waiting to be invited up the table? This, Jesus implied, would be at the heart of receiving hospitality.

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<sup>4</sup> There is evidence of this assumption as far back as the third century; see I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), p.578-79. It is quite likely the assumption when back much further.

And then Jesus turns to the host himself. Why, he asks, had the host invited who he had invited—relatives, friends, wealthy and influential neighbours? Were they hoping that those folks would owe them a dinner? That, Jesus said, so easily becomes a matter of credit extended and debts paid. Instead, invite those who can't 'pay you back'—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. This, Jesus implied, would be the heart of extending hospitality.' "Show hospitality"; that is do not merely entertain strangers,' said St. John Chrysostom, 'but do it with love for the stranger'.<sup>5</sup> That is what that great Patriarch of Constantinople said when he read this morning's Epistle, though his words are just as relevant to the Gospel story.

For Jesus, God's hospitality always invited those who could not repay it into God's household to sit around the Lord's Table. This is what Divine Grace means. And we shouldn't presume to know who deserves to sit closer to God—that is for God to arrange. Jesus won the argument by appealing to the same Scriptures the Pharisees esteemed.

But this story isn't meant to be a model of how to win an argument. It offers the truth about God's hospitality to us within what might be called 'hospitable arguments'.

Jesus' critics remind me of the characters in a Monty Python sketch who get into an argument about whether (or not) to have an argument.

Jesus' critics were ready to pounce—they were convinced Jesus was wrong and were only looking for the intention to accuse him—they weren't interested in exchanging points of view, of stepping forward in the search for truth. They refused God's hospitality and so of course refused to extend it to anyone else.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Hebrews*, ed. Erik M. Heen & Philip Krey (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p.229.

Jesus was not faint-hearted. But he did not begin with ill will. He noticed the contradictory assumptions of his critics, and pointed these out to his critics. His arguments had a point—to change minds and hearts and lives. Jesus offered the divine alternative (true hospitality) to the selfish and short-sighted mental traps of his critics.

Jeremiah, centuries before, had presented God's arguments, and so urged his fellows to turn from the cracked and empty cisterns of their hearts to God whom he called 'the fountain of living water'. This we do at the Lord's table, who we confess feeds us all with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can't use tricks to win people to divine truth—they always fail in the end. But we can receive and offer hospitality with our hands and minds and hearts.