

Proper 26 31 October 2010 Bob Partlow

Today we have another Gospel story about a tax collector....just as we did last week. I won't repeat what Ruth said last week because she said it very well. If you missed her sermon, it is posted on the parish web site. Tax collectors were as she told you outcasts, at least among Jesus' cohorts. But, I wonder if he was an outcast among other tax collectors or the super rich of his time? It seems as if life was simpler then: there was the religious law and if you were outside the "law" you were shunned and put outside of nice society. Samaritans, Gentiles, lepers were outsiders. There was also the "purity code" If you had touched a dead person, or were a woman during her menses or had a mental illness (demon)...you were excluded...unclean.

It is not so clear today. We may not respect some of the Wall Street rich, media stars, big name athletes, and politicians but we are clearly fascinated by them to the point of obsession. Some people can't get enough of Lady Gaga, Tiger Woods or Sarah Palin. Yet polls say that we most respect physicians and nurses; police, firefighters and the military; teachers and some clergy (a declining status). But with the exception of physicians, we don't pay them very much and we do after all equate income with worth don't we? .....and we seldom see them featured in People Magazine and the likes that populate most doctors waiting rooms....where I have spent too much time recently.

So, while in Jesus time it was pretty clear who was acceptable and who was not it was religiously based while today it is not so clear and has little religious basis.....we are more schizophrenic....we are attracted to those we do not respect...like a moth to a candle. Does this not also mean that as a culture we are more secular now?

But Jesus message is for all times, including ours.....and his message is very simple: God loves and accepts all of his creation. God's big plan is to bring all of creation, including you and me, back into perfect harmony with our creator....that is called salvation. Are you saved? Jesus called it the Kingdom of God and it is essentially all he ever preached about: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN! We may exclude and reject but God welcomes us all.

I hear Jesus saying “Zacchaeus , what are you doing up in that tree? Come on down boy, I want to come to dinner in your home and be with your friends. Who told you that you weren’t fit company for me?”. I think also of the story of Adam and Eve hiding from God in the garden after that little problem with the apple and the snake. God is walking through the garden in the cool of the evening but Adam is hiding from God. God asks Adam where are you and why are you hiding and Adam says “Because I was naked and I was afraid”. To which God says “Who told you that you were naked?”

Really the same question put to Zacchaeus. Who told you that you were defective, unclean, not good enough? Again and again Jesus message is that a Kingdom of God is coming, it is like a banquet, a wedding party and everyone is invited.....everyone. God does not seek our fear but our praise and awe at the wonder of creation. Who tells you that you are not worthy? Get down out of that tree!

The task of the church, of us, is to bring all people into the party.....and to tell them to fear not....they are God’s beloved.

Who is on the outside today? Who is going to take their hand and bring them in out of the cold....into the Kingdom of God. Let me tell you it is not going to be either political party next Tuesday. No political party has the value system required. What is needed is an engagement with the religious concepts of Generosity and Hospitality....what Party has those concepts in their platform? Neither.

From the earliest days of Christian faith the basic Christian creed has been “Jesus is Lord” ...which is also to say Caesar is not. But be warned; to deny the lordship of Caesar is to invite trouble...

To whom must we today extend Hospitality and Generosity? Who is not with us this morning? Look around! Whose only experience of church has been judgment and exclusion? (invite the congregation to respond)....

I need to tell you how excited I got last Sunday. Most of the news that comes to me of the larger church is pretty discouraging...downright depressing. Just Friday as I was working on this I was receiving news that: one Diocese was organizing an effort to try to stop the consecration of the priest elected bishop in another diocese; several diocese in South Africa were splitting from the Archbishop of Canterbury and that the Bishop of South Carolina had deposed four priests. I don't care who is right and who is wrong in these disputes.....they are all minor leaks on the sinking ship Titanic!

The church that I get excited about is the one that is flinging wide open the entrance gates to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a church that has the possibility of getting young adults to stop self-identifying as "none of the above" or "spiritual but not religious" ....but become committed followers of the Way of Jesus Christ!

What excited me last Sunday...not just excited but feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit of God? It was the book club that Nancy Alpine has so wonderfully chaired. They were discussing a book suggested by Sarah Parkison by a woman, who was with us..a woman from here in Chesterfield County who has found a way to open up the possibility for people like you and me to go out and take people by the hand and invite them into the Kingdom of God. I saw a foretaste of the church that will survive the sinking of the Titanic. It is a church that will embrace the ancient creeds and liturgy of the church, but will empower you, the people of God to be the church....to bring all people into the kingdom of God...this was Jesus' dream.

Are you willing?