

Jesus and the summer of '63

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 29, 2010: The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Luke 14:1, 7-14.*

Flying first class is not something I often do. Which is to say it is something I never do. Fundamentally I'm cheap, and I don't fly often enough to earn miles to use for an upgrade. But it was not always that way. Long before the era of triple silvery platinum elite, I was named by Delta Airlines as a Flying Colonel, an award I received for having flown more flights in and out of Jackson MS one year than anyone else. I wasn't sure whether to be thrilled or depressed; whatever, it gave me a lifetime membership to the airline club, the Crown Room it was then called, and access to cheap upgrades. Sadly lifetime for Delta ended up being shorter than my life. About the time I left the corporate world and stopped flying every week, Delta hit some financial turbulence; and before I could say "Delta is ready when you are," they had taken away my member-for-life status, no more free pre-flight drinks for me; and though they still print "Flying Colonel" on my boarding pass, no one cares. It means nothing; I have checked. And checked again.

Of course, it is a silly example of the ways we distinguish ourselves from others, but there are myriad of them, many of which are much more painful and more insidious than where we sit on a crowded airplane. The truth is I have always been privileged—white, male, born to educated parents who valued it for me, not rich but never lacking; I have benefited not always with intention but undoubtedly benefited from these factors about myself that have nothing to do with worth or achievement. The playing field, which is the context of my world, is not equally shared. Even in our democracy with its founding words about all people being created equal, the truth is there is a complex dynamic of circumstances that affect our

starting positions, which in large part determines how and what we do.

A child of the south and the 60's, I found myself thinking a great deal this weekend about 1963. Just ten years old that hot August I heard all the talk about the "I have a dream" speech given by Martin Luther King. I listened with young ears and probably big eyes to comments that "we had to reclaim what was ours, less the government take it all." It was that summer that the "finer" restaurants began to reorganize as clubs so that no government body could force a restaurant to serve someone it preferred not to serve. The resistance continued, but it had been dealt a fatal blow; a new spirit was born and laws at least soon would change. Life would never be exactly as it was. Nearly 50 years later, I am heavy hearted when I listen to the rhetoric in our country now. Reclaiming the spirit that those high-minded days of believing in true equality engendered in all of us may be the most important thing we now have to do. The backlash to political correctness has made us less willing, sadly so, to remember what the world was like before people concerned themselves so much with the power of words. I remember that world well, and I don't want to go back to it.

Such ponderings about divisions between people are not modern inventions. The Greco-Roman world of Jesus' time was markedly stratified. Even among the Jews who had little political power, there was a laborious system that carefully separated the worthy, the holy, the clean from the worthless, the unholy, and the unclean. Nowhere was this more evident than in stories about eating. The gospel of Luke is particularly noted for its many accounts of

Jesus gathering with one group or another for a meal. Often Jesus is found at a table engaged in something akin to a symposium during which a philosophical treatise is presented and during the course of a meal various positions are discussed and debated. This scene, more than likely contrived by Luke as it has no exact likeness in the other gospels, is the setting for discussing how people are chosen for seats of honor at public meals and who is admitted in the first place, the first going to the question of humility, the second to the treatment of the poor and disenfranchised. This social setting, a common meal, provided a perfect opportunity if Jesus was searching for one to confront the highly stratified world in which he lived.

There is little consensus about the verses in this passage, which seem to present Jesus as an advice columnist. Take a less exalted seat, Jesus suggests, as it is better to be moved forward than to be dismissed and sent to the back. I get that. I would never sit in a first class seat in hopes that it is vacant; it would be too embarrassing to be caught and returned to “my people” back in coach. But does such advice giving seem consistent with most of the teachings that Jesus brought us? Well, wait; it gets worse. Jesus next tells his hearers not to invite their peers to the banquet, peers who have the capability to pay them back with a similar invitation; no, no they should invite their inferiors—the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind. Why—because such persons will not be capable of repaying them, a fact which will convince God to reward them! Oh, my! What is going on? The Australian theologian, Bill Loader, refers to such thinking as “spiritual capitalism.” It is at least that. Does any of this sound like the Jesus we know? To me—and more importantly to a number of scholars—it is more likely that Jesus is using the absurd to poke fun at a system of stratification that he finds utterly abhorrent.

In my heart I know that Jesus did not care a whit about who sat where at a dinner party. He just did not live in that world; in fact, we

would have to say that he deliberately, flagrantly demonstrated his disregard for such foolishness by playing with children, talking to women and not just church ladies, but women of the night, touching sick and dying people, eating with all sorts and conditions of people. In my uptight universe of politeness, a world I like, thank you very much, I believe that Jesus was polite. Just give me that please. But I know and you do too that Jesus was less into etiquette than into changing peoples’ lives from the inside out. Doing that required that he turn the world upside down, a fact that scared these good, religious people to death and eventually resulted in his. They were right: the empire as they knew it was under assault. When Martin Luther King attacked another empire 2000 years later, he paid the price with his life as well.

Loving as Jesus loved still makes people of order uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable. These ancient texts that we have tweaked and turned and cast off and brought back and strategically followed and just as strategically ignored—these texts, *when taken as a whole*, scare the daylights out of us. The problem with being honest about the depth and width of Jesus’ message, with being honest about how that message calls us to be different from the way we often are—the problem with that honesty is that it makes us throw up our hands and hearts, saying “Lord, have mercy. I can’t live like that. I can’t take any of this stuff too seriously.” And then we—and the world—suffer because the very one upon whom we base this entire enterprise is largely ignored.

MLK acknowledged he might never get to the Promised Land . . . but he had a dream and that dream defined a path. The destination was always clear for him, and it must be for us. We may never get there either; but as those who would follow Jesus, our sights have to be set on higher ground. MLK reminds us, somewhat shockingly, what it means to dare to take a moral stand. As scary as it is, passivity is never an option. We need to be stirred up, praying

that our passion will be ignited or reignited; we need to be troubled by meanness in the world from whatever quarters it comes; and we must not let our silence speak for us. We must refuse to be intimidated by those who insist that we are confusing our religion and our politics. They are inextricably connected; and though it is always possible that our positions could be wrong even if we think we are following Jesus, we do not have the option of not caring, of remaining pristine, comfortable and inoffensive in our detachment.

The lines are drawn in our culture today just as clearly as they were in the time of Jesus. On which side will we stand—the side of complete self-interest or the side of generosity and equality? Glenn Beck told his tens of thousands of followers yesterday that “today America begins to turn back to God.”

I hope he is right—at least about that—and that we are ready for just how subversive . . . and how dangerous . . . that truly would be.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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