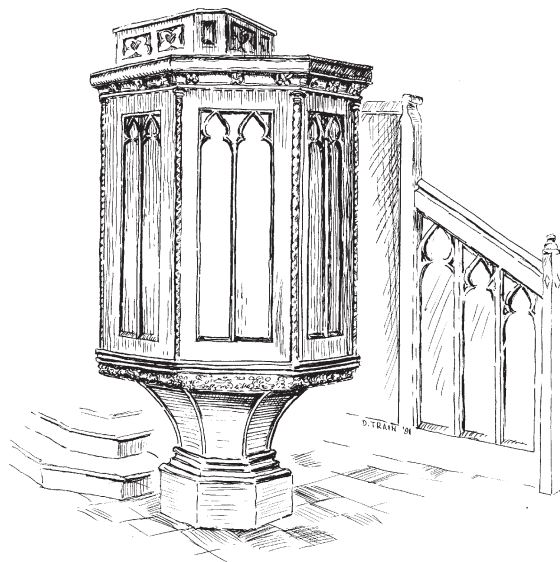


March 2, 2008

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Making Room (4)
Ice Cream Is Good for the Soul
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 5:27-32

Our theme for Lent is "Hospitality." I began by thinking this was a fairly innocent theme. Who can argue with hospitality? Invite some friends over, have a good meal, and be nice. But, the deeper you think about it the more there is a bite, an edge, a sting to hospitality. If we are going to be truly hospitable to the stranger, then the stranger becomes the focus of our love and attention and compassion. True hospitality requires loving your neighbor as yourself, or even more than yourself. That's a tall order when your neighbor is the Van Cleve family and you want to eat with your Presby Group; or your neighbor is the new student in class and you already have a group of friends; or when your neighbor is the undocumented worker. We talked about that last week. Loving your neighbor as yourself – being truly hospitable can even be a tall order with those you know well – like friends or family or disciples.

Our New Testament lesson from the fifth chapter of Luke tells of the calling of Levi from tax collecting to discipleship. We are told that Levi accepted Jesus' invitation: got up, left everything and followed him. The first thing Levi did in following Jesus was to give Jesus a great banquet. In Luke especially, Jesus is always eating.

Biblical hospitality is an act of worship – particularly in the act of eating together. As we sit down and

share the stuff of life, we share ourselves. We bond in new ways, experiencing the Christ in each other. Our food becomes more than food when we share it in a spirit of love and hospitality. It becomes a moment of grace. "Where two or three are gathered in my name...."

The spirit of love and hospitality – the concern and interest and compassion for the other – is more important than the menu or the wine label. The wisdom writer of Proverbs knew this. Did you catch that proverb Nancy read earlier? "Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it" (Proverbs 15:17). The Message Bible says, "Better a bread crust shared in love than a slab of prime rib served in hate." And for those that still are fond of the King James, "Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith."

We see two settings. There is a humble table set with the simplest of foods, but surrounded by people feasting upon the grace of a meal shared in love. There is a banquet table complete with silver, crystal, and the finest entrees. Servants are in watchful attendance. No wine glass goes unreplenished. But the gloom of animosity fills the room. There is no warm laughter. The table conversation is cold. No one reaches out to touch another with affection. Amid the feast there is famine. Yes, the key ingredient in true hospitality is love.

All of us, I think, long to be the focus of true hospitality. I am reminded of Garrison Keillor's description of his "storm home" in the imaginative memoir *Lake Wobegon*. He tells us that the principal of the school, Mr. Detman, fearful of the possibility of a winter blizzard during the school day, has assigned each student from the country a storm home in town near the school. If a blizzard struck, each child was to go to his storm home; Keillor writes:

Mine was the Klockls', an old couple who lived in a little green cottage by the lake. She kept a rock garden on the lake side, with a terrace of alyssum, pansies, petunias, and moss roses, rising to the statue of the Blessed Virgin seated, and around her feet a bed of marigolds. It was a magical garden, perfectly arranged; the ivy on the trellis seemed to move up in formation, platoons of asters and irises along the drive, and three cast iron deer grazed in the front: it looked like the home of the kindly old couple that the children, lost in the forest, suddenly came upon in a clearing and know they are lucky to be in a story with a happy ending. That was how it felt about the Klockls, after I got their name on a slip of paper and walked by their house and inspected it, though my family might have wondered about my assignment to a Catholic home, had they known. We were suspicious of Catholics, enough to wonder if perhaps the Pope had ordered them to take in a little Protestant child during blizzards and make them say the rosary for their supper. But I imagined the Klockls had personally chosen me as their storm child because they liked me. "Him!" they had told Mr. Detman, "In the event of a blizzard, we want that boy! The skinny one with the thick glasses!"

No blizzard came during school hours that year. All the snow storms were convenient evening or weekend ones, and I never got to stay with the Klockls, but they were often in my thoughts and they grew large in my imagination. My storm home. Blizzards aren't the only storms and not the worst by any means. I could imagine worse things. If the worst should come, I would go to the Klockls and knock on their door. "Hello," I'd say, "I'm your storm child."

“Oh, I know,” she’d say, “I was wondering when you’d come. Oh, it’s good to see you. How would you like a cup of hot chocolate and an oatmeal cookie?”

We’d sit at the table. “Looks like this storm is going to last awhile.”

“Yes.”

“Terrible storm. They say it’s going to get worse before it stops. I just pray for anyone who’s out in this.”

“Yes.”

“But, we’re so glad to have you. I can’t tell you. Carl! Come down and see who’s here.”

“Is it the storm child?”

“Yes, Himself, in the flesh!”

Better is a dinner of vegetables or hot chocolate and oatmeal cookies – where love is...

I recall our Thanksgiving in Pittsburgh in 1989. My brother and I and our families had come home to my parents’ apartment. Six adults, five teen-aged grandchildren, and four dogs in an apartment made for two. It was to be our last Thanksgiving together. My father was dying of cancer. He stayed mostly in bed at this point. With the constraints of a small kitchen, it wasn’t the Thanksgiving feast we’d enjoyed in other years. With the sober mood of my father’s condition there wasn’t the frivolous air of Thanksgivings past either. No kilts were worn, which over the years had become our custom.

On Thanksgiving morning my mother ushered us younger generations out the apartment. We took the dogs and ourselves for a walk in a nearby park and returned at the appointed hour. When we returned, we saw that my mother had somehow negotiated my father to his favorite chair. He was sitting up in his pajamas and bathrobe and with his Scottish bonnet askew on his head. We circled up in the living room with our plates on our laps. No room for everyone around the small eating table. I choked with emotion through grace. My brother choked through a beautiful letter of appreciation to my father from a man who used to work with him. We laughed. We cried. And my father was insistent that one of the grandchildren take a plate of turkey to Alvin, the garage attendant who was unlucky enough to have drawn duty in the apartment’s garage on Thanksgiving. While the most modest Thanksgiving dinner I ever ate, it is the Thanksgiving of which I will always have the sweetest memories.

“Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is...”

But, I also remember other meals. I remember the lavish, but strained, rehearsal dinner for a wedding bitterly opposed by the bride’s parents.

I remember a meal at the home of my best friend. We were teenagers and my friend’s father pressed what he thought was harmless teasing to the point where my friend’s sister left the table in tears and humiliation.

I remember being told by a parishioner of the time when, in the middle of a lavish meal in a fancy restaurant, her husband had informed her there was someone else and that he would not be going home with her that night.

And, I remember Judas slipping away from the table and disappearing into the darkness.

“Better is a Last Supper where love is....”

I also recall the story of a mother whose young child understood what hospitality was all about.

“Last week I took my children to a restaurant,” she said. “My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads, he said, ‘God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would thank you even more if Mom gets us ice cream for dessert. Amen.’”

“Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, ‘That’s what’s wrong with this country. Kids today don’t even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!’”

“Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, ‘Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?’”

“As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job and that God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, ‘I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer.’”

“ ‘Really?’ my son asked.

“ ‘Cross my heart,’ he replied. Then in a theatrical whisper he said, pointing to the woman whose remark had started the whole thing, ‘It’s too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes.’”

“Naturally, I bought my children ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment and then did something I will remember for the rest of my life. He picked up his sundae and without a word walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile, he told her, ‘Here, this is for you. Ice Cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.’”

Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes. Especially when we share it in the sacred act of hospitality.