

September 16, 2007 Sermon from Bishop Mathes

XVI Pentecost, Proper 19C

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

Let me begin with words made immortal by The Grateful Dead:

Sometimes the light's all shinin' on me;
Other times I can barely see.
Lately it occurs to me: what a long, strange trip it's been.

That could be the musical theme of my first thirty months as your bishop. And in the midst of all the strangeness, this Cathedral and this community has been my stability.

It is with a heart filled with gratitude that I am joining you this morning. My gratitude is partly due to the spiritual home that you provide my family as we continue to make San Diego, and this wonderful diocese, our home. Terri has found her work on behalf of Dorcas House most fulfilling and, as she has told the story of that ministry throughout the diocese, you have become more and more the cathedral and center of our diocesan community. And my daughter, Sara, who has had the privilege of serving these past two-and-a-half years as an acolyte begins on Monday her freshman year at Santa Clara. She is the most thoroughly Californian of the Mathes clan; she simply says that the Cathedral is "Kewl."

I hope that you know what a remarkable place this is. You have a superlative dean, which was brought home to me again when he preached last Sunday at the installation of our new rector at All Saints', Vista. Canon Thomas is gives selflessly planning diocesan liturgies, in addition to her tireless ministry here. I don't know what I would have done over the last eighteen months, in the midst of nine congregations fracturing without the associate clergy of this Cathedral. And I would be remiss if I did not commend the extraordinary staff, who partners in so many ways our diocesan team. For all of this, I say "thank you, thank you, thank you."

But this isn't all about you!

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and preacher extraordinaire, has a lot to say about table manners in the day of Jesus. She has pointed to a Middle Eastern proverb that she suggests that Jesus probably knew: "I saw them eating and I knew who they were." Indeed, throughout the gospels, the continuing motif of Jesus' ministry is table fellowship. I dare say this can be good Biblical justification for today's picnic. But more deeply, it is why the Christian community is one that comes together around a table from which we offer bread and wine. Because Jesus told us to, we dare to bless the same and call it the Body of Christ and the Cup of Salvation. We believe that in these holy mysteries, Christ is present. We believe that we become what we eat -- the Body of Christ, knit together as different parts that become today's incarnation of Jesus and continuing his work of breaking bread in the Kingdom of God.

In today's gospel, we are given a vision of this Kingdom in two of three parables about lost things: a lost sheep and a lost coin. The third lost thing is the lost son and brother, the parable of the Prodigal son. But you have to come back for that story! Each says something powerful about God and about us. The context of these parables is grumblings about Jesus' table fellowship: "This

fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Oops! Jesus is not playing by the rules and the dogmatic and fearful religious authorities of his day are not pleased.

Jesus’ response to their prickly posturing is to tell these parables. What is remarkable to me is his opening, “Which one of you of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” This is clearly bad sheep management. You don’t shepherd this way with sheep. It is clearly risking the ninety-nine for the one. You do not shepherd sheep this way, but you do shepherd human beings this way. This is how Jesus shepherds. This is how we are to be the church.

In this time, religious authorities have lost site of this truth—and I must include myself in this failure—because from time to time my own fear gets the best of me and I fail to go after the one and play economic safety with the ninety-nine. “I saw them eating and I knew who they were.”

When we look at the table fellowship of Jesus, we see that it included Mary Magdalene, who we know was not going to get into the Junior League. It included Zachaeus and Matthew who might have said the Roman equivalent of, “Hi, I am with the IRS; I’m here to help you.” It included the hemorrhaging and the filthy and the down-right crazy.

What would today’s equivalent look like? Honestly, we fall short of the mark here and in all our congregations. Again, leaning on Barbara Brown Taylor, let me share with you how she envisions Jesus’ table today. She writes,

Her picture pushes us to wonder about who is going to send us over the edge. Who is going to make us want to push away from the table and go to a different establishment? In this time in our Anglican Communion, this is the very behavior that is being exercised. As some say that they are in impaired communion, table fellowship, with the Episcopal Church because we sit with those of whom they disapprove, they are suggesting different tables. A new kind of purity law is beginning created.

And lest we become too proud or too judgmental, many of us are rather glad to not have them at our table. I often say that God has a strange sense of humor. At the house of bishops, we sit at round tables for all of our sessions and those table groupings shift after every General Convention. At this last House of Bishops, I found myself seated with a bishop whom I believe is most responsible for this most difficult time in our church—one who has created the very organization that is trying to replace our Episcopal Church as the Province of the Anglican Communion. I don’t want to sit with him. But that is precisely the one who I am supposed to sit with.

You see this Anglican Communion of ours is hard work. It is not supposed to be easy and it is not. We talk about diversity and we really mean the rainbow of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race. But our Anglican heritage calls us to something deeper: comprehensiveness. Our comprehensiveness brings us cheek and jowl with those who we are unsettled by and calls us to form the Body of Christ with just those people.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, roots this comprehensiveness where it belongs in our baptismal identity when he says that our baptism “places us in solidarities not of our choosing.”

For those of you who are gay or lesbian, some of whom have lived generations in Christ-centered and loving relationships of which I am in awe, it is tough and maybe unthinkable to consider your church fellowship as including those who would call you a sinner and refuse for you the complete ministrations of this church. Some of you may tire as I and others ask you for patience as we work within this comprehensive and conflictual communion to find a way forward. I do not have an easy answer for you. The only answer I have is quintessentially Anglican and, I think, consistent with Jesus' way. We are to continue to pray together and break bread together.

Elie Wiesel, Noble Prize author, tells the story of a trial of God in a concentration camp. The assembled court found God guilty of not intervening while atrocities were being visited upon the Jewish people. But before sentence could be imposed, those gathered retired for evening prayers. And that is what we are to do in the midst of our unknowing, searching and striving. We are to come and pray. We are to break bread with those with whom we are friends and those with whom we are enemies. For each is a part of the sacred mystery we call the church. Each is an essential part of the comprehensiveness that we are called to witness. For in the end, they will see who we are eating with and they will know who we are. And the assembly will be holy and beautiful. And in the center will be Jesus.