



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, September 26th, 2010

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

A funny thing about human beings isn't really very funny at all. It is our ability to go straight to the wrong end of the stick and grasp it firmly in both hands. Another funny thing about human beings is often very funny indeed: It is our unfortunate propensity for giving ourselves airs and graces.

These are the two common human characteristics that Jesus addresses in today's reading from St. Luke's Gospel. And both occasions for comment took place at the home of one of the chief Pharisees where Jesus was invited for a formal Sabbath Day lunch.

It was the time of the week when religiously minded men got together to discuss theology. One of the most important subjects under discussion was the question of who the Messiah would be. This, in turn, explains why Jesus had been invited. The influential men at the party assumed he was seeking their endorsement.

Jesus was far and away the leading candidate for Messiah. He fulfilled to the letter all of the prophecies concerning the Anointed One. The power brokers at the meal also knew it was widely reported that the crowd who had witnessed his baptism in the Jordan had heard God's voice hail him as his "Beloved Son."

On paper, he seemed to be a perfect candidate. In the cold light of day, however, he had some very serious "negatives" against him. First, his

piety was more than a little questionable. He was reportedly less than rigorous in his observance of the Sabbath and other aspects of religious practice. What's more, he had frequently been distressingly disrespectful to the nation's leaders – people like themselves – folks we would probably call the "Inside the Beltway Crowd."

Things got off to a shaky start: One of the invited guests was suffering from a chronic kidney disease. "Is it illegal to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus asked, innocently. This put them in a terribly embarrassing position. After all, the sick man was a friend and colleague. They couldn't say "no" – and Jesus knew it.

After he had healed the man, he rubbed salt in the wound by turning to them and saying: "Face it, if any of you saw an animal in trouble on the Sabbath day, you wouldn't think twice about helping it. So what's wrong with helping human beings on the Sabbath?" How could anybody challenge a statement like that?

Next, he started picking holes in the way they chose their places at the dining table. The more important people went immediately to the head of the table, while the less distinguished guests jockeyed for position below the salt. There was nothing very exceptional about it. Indeed, it happens all the time today.

"Wait a minute, fellows," said Jesus, "Isn't this a bit presumptuous? Surely, you'd expose yourself

to less embarrassment if you were a bit more modest and went to the foot of the table and let the host call you up to a more prestigious place.”

Jesus’ listeners just didn’t get it. They were outraged by his impiety about the Sabbath. (Animals, unlike human beings, are incapable of rational thought and can’t be patient). And they were puzzled by his refusal to accept that hierarchies come naturally to human beings. After all, somebody has to be the Alpha dog.

For two millennia, Christians have claimed to understand exactly what Jesus was talking about at this particular luncheon party. Most of us would say we understand what he meant when he said there was nothing wrong with healing on the Sabbath. We claim to understand precisely what he meant when he declared that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. But do we really?

The Puritans in the 16th Century claimed they knew exactly what he was talking about. They knew that God had nothing against healing on the Sabbath. They knew God didn’t mind people performing essential work on the Sabbath. They also knew that God simply didn’t want people to have any fun on the Sabbath.

Therefore they banned the theater, dancing, skittles and all manner of ball games on Sunday. And just to make sure, they ordered Sunday closing for bars and pubs and pretty well everywhere else folks congregate to socialize and enjoy a good time. Just about the only thing they let people do was sit in church and listen to interminable sermons about hell fire and damnation.

Today we are very much wiser. Today we truly understand the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. And, just to prove it, we have banished God from the Sabbath altogether. If he is very lucky – and we have absolutely nothing else to do – we’ll toddle along to church, providing, of course, the service doesn’t last much more than an hour . . . and the organist picks our favorite hymns . . . and the preacher’s “message” doesn’t offend us.

And we haven’t done an awful lot better when it comes to what Jesus was saying about our human predilection for hierarchies. Jesus said Christian leadership was to be quite different from worldly concepts of leadership. Worldly leaders, he said, lorded it over people and bossed them about. Christians who aspired to leadership should follow a quite different model. Christian leaders should regard themselves as the lowest Indian on the totem pole and act as the servant of everybody else.

This is something we have never managed to achieve. Our political, civic and business leaders certainly don’t regard themselves as the lowest Indians on the totem pole and they certainly haven’t been able to resist the temptation to lord it over us and boss us about. Even folks we call “civil servants” often act as though they are our civil masters. And, it seems, that’s just the way we want it

We have been no more successful in applying Jesus’ teaching in our church life. How many bishops – or priests, for that matter – act as though they are the servants of the flocks to which they are called to minister. The answer is “remarkably few.”

May be the reason for this is that we are simply wired this way. Indeed, the thread that runs throughout Holy Scripture, and especially the Gospels, is that there is no way in which we, humans, can hope to reach God’s standard of holiness. And this, of course, is why we so desperately need to rely on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

But the fact that we are ultimately doomed to fail to meet God’s standards does not exempt us from the duty to make at least a stab in the right direction. And Jesus has told us exactly how to do so. The only genuine way we can demonstrate our love towards God, he says, is by trying to love our fellow men as much as we love ourselves. We can make a start towards this by accepting the fact that it’s God’s job to pass judgment on the character flaws of our fellow men, while it’s our job to try to live in harmony with them. *AMEN.*