



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday After Trinity, June 17th, 2012

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

Today's Bible readings are about the most frightening in the Prayer Book. This probably sounds a bit strange. After all, in today's Communion Epistle, St. John extols the virtues of love. So does St. Paul in his famous 13th Chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. So, too, Job who emphasizes how important it is to act in a kind and charitable fashion towards one's neighbor.

True, the reading from St. Luke's Gospel is a lot more ominous. It's the story of a man who made a great supper and invited all his friends and neighbors to share it with him. Yet, far from cheerfully accepting his invitation, they all made excuses and spurned him. It is a dark and unpleasant tale, but it's not particularly scary. Jesus, after all, was speaking to the Pharisees who had rejected him.

But set all; this in the context of what John, Paul and Job are saying about love. St. Paul, for example, says that if we do not love our neighbors, our faith is completely worthless. It doesn't matter if we have a cast iron faith, or are as eloquent as the angelic host, or give everything we have to feed the hungry and homeless, or go bravely to a martyr's death – none of this will matter in if we do not love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

And St. John says exactly the same thing. In fact, he points out that the only way we can be sure we've been saved is if we love our fellow

men. He then goes on to say that somebody who hates his brother (neighbor, fellow man) is not just a run of the mill sinner, but rather is a murderer.

Moreover, he says, there is no way we can fake it. We can't just pay lip service to this commandment. We can't just assert we love our neighbors, or put it in writing and not mean it. We need to love our neighbors honestly, both in word and deed. God can probe the very depths of our hearts and souls. He knows instantly when we are being phony.

This is tough stuff. Most of us can talk the talk and most of us can walk the walk, at least spasmodically. God wants us to do these things, of course, but they are not his primary focus. What God wants, above all, is for us to think the thought. He wants us to take it into our hearts and translate it into our lives. And what's really frightening, he says, if we don't do that, everything else we do is utterly worthless.

Actually, none of this should come as a surprise. These readings are commentaries on Jesus' Summary of the Law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the Law, and the Prophets."

This brings us to the Gospel reading: One might hope that, having been thoroughly beaten up by St. John, St. Paul and Job, the folks who devised the lectionary might give us some respite in the Gospel. In fact, it is even more terrifying.

The audience Jesus was addressing in the parable of the man's Great Supper did, indeed, include Pharisees. But he was also addressing publicans and sinners, folks who the Pharisees despised as apostates and traitors. And there is no comfort in his words for any of them who were listening to him at the time, or for us reading the parable today. All of us fare rather badly. Perhaps you'll see what I mean when I explain the various groups of listeners understood it.

When the Pharisees heard the parable of the man and his supper, they were sure he was talking about publicans and sinners – apostate Jews who had rejected the Law of Moses. They had rejected God's means of salvation by deliberately declining to live by the precepts of the Law. The Pharisees understood that these to be the folks who had turned down their invitations to the great supper.

The publicans and sinners, by contrast, saw the Pharisees as targets of the parable. They questioned whether Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah. They contested the idea that he was the Son of God. What's more, the Pharisees were people who harshly applied the Law of Moses to others – like the woman taken in adultery – while minutely searching for loopholes to evade the Law's more onerous burdens.

Both parties were, in fact, correct. The parable condemns both the Pharisees and the Jewish apostates. Both had received their invitations to the Great Supper, but both were making excuses for not attending, because both were pursuing their own agendas to the exclusion of God's agenda. The publicans and sinners wanted God to stick to the Pharisees, and the Pharisees wanted God to stick it to the Romans, but only after he had stuck it to the publicans and sinners.

Neither of the parties was much interested in loving their neighbors. Nor were they in the least

bit interested in showing any sort of love for their enemies. Yet both saw themselves as the honored guests – the poor and marginalized folks gathered in from the city's streets and alleys and from the country highways and hedgerows. Neither party saw themselves as spurning God's invitation. Quite to the contrary. They were absolutely convinced they had accepted it.

The problem, you see, is that most people tend to believe we have accepted God's invitation to his Great Supper because we conceive that our terms of acceptance are exactly the same as God's terms of acceptance. We forget that we don't make the rules. God does. And God's rules are very different from our own.

St. John, St. Paul and Job spell God's rules for accepting his invitation to the Great Supper with crystal clarity. They make it very plain that the externals of the faith are not sufficient. Of course, we should attend Church regularly. Of course, we should do our best to spread the good news of the Gospel to our fellow men. Of course, we should give generously to help those less fortunate than ourselves.

But these are not enough. What God really wants is for us to love our fellow men. By this, he means that we should treat everybody we meet as we would treat Jesus. It doesn't mean we should be undiscerning and lavish everyone, indiscriminately, with money and gifts they don't need and we can ill afford. But it does mean that we should treat them with the same consideration we show to our own children. In other words: these readings are Christianity 101. And if you haven't grasped their message, you need to do so immediately.

Paul tells us the greatest of all the Christian virtues is charity. So, too does St. Peter, who promises us that charity will cover "the multitude of sins." Love, you see, is the single human quality that begins to approach the perfection that is God. If we have love for humanity in our hearts the rest of the virtues will automatically follow. Much to their surprise, no doubt, the Beatles were right: Love is, indeed, all you need. *AMEN*