

“Plotting Harmony”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

10-4-20 World Communion Sunday

Based upon Luke 19:1-19; 1 Cor. 11:17-29

Several years ago, when author/pastor Brian McLaren came out with his book on faith and human development called Naked Spirituality, he came to speak about it in Baltimore Presbytery, and I went to hear him. When he described his book and what his goals were in writing it, it made me think of another approach to the same topic which complemented his in such a way that I thought if they were taught together it would enable even more people to embrace his message that a relationship with God was possible and grow in their faith. So, after his lecture, I went up to ask him about this and get him to sign my copy of his book. It was only after we had had a nice discussion and I was heading out to the parking lot that I discovered that he had signed my book, “To Elizabeth, plotting harmony.”

That was such an unexpected and nice way for him to interpret my questions that his words have stuck with me ever since. Don't we all want harmony? With all the discord in the world, especially this week, don't you dream of everyone just coming together in peace and harmony instead of trying to tear each other to pieces? I know I do. But until McLaren signed my book that way, it didn't really occur to me that harmony was something that can or should be plotted. The verb “to plot” sounds so subversive somehow, that to match it with a word like “harmony” is thought-provoking, at least to me. Can you plot people getting along? Can you engineer reconciliation? Today, on World Communion Sunday, when Christians of all different stipes gather all around the world, in sanctuaries and parking lots, at kitchen tables and in cars, the meal that we will share answers those questions with a resounding “yes!” But Jesus' plot started unfolding long before he instituted the Lord's Supper. We can see it in action in today's story of Zacchaeus, the famously short chief tax collector, who opted to spy on Jesus from the branch of a large sycamore tree.

For your future trivial pursuit purposes, I feel the need to note that it is not at all clear in the text that Zacchaeus was the one who was short; it could just as easily have been Jesus. But the point is that the crowd around Jesus that day was so big that the tax collector couldn't see him when he came to town. We aren't told why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, all we know is that even when he was hiding in the leaves of the tree, Zacchaeus could be seen by Jesus, and that made all the difference. Jesus called out to Zacchaeus and basically invited himself over for lunch or dinner. Stunned and pleased, Zacchaeus jumped down and accepted Jesus' proposal. This made the people in the crowd, who were not fans of tax collectors, grumble loudly. But Jesus didn't care. Instead he reprimanded them, saying, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

I've preached before on the two different ways this story can be interpreted. The most popular, which was taught to generations of children in Sunday school through song, is to see this as a conversion story. Zacchaeus, we are meant to believe, was a horrible man. Everybody in those days knew that tax collectors were flunkies for Rome and extortionists to boot. They oppressed the Jews for profit. The fact that Zacchaeus was a “chief” tax collector just tells us that

he was a super creep, which is why the crowd was so mad that Jesus would want to go to his house. They didn't think a righteous man should have anything to do with the likes of Zacchaeus, let alone accept his hospitality.

The other way to read this story, which is equally supported in the Greek and growing in popularity, is that Zacchaeus was actually a righteous man. His name means "righteous one," and his offer to sell half of his possessions to give to the poor, and to give back four times what would be owed by law if he had defrauded anyone, certainly seem to suggest that he was aptly named. But Zacchaeus was treated as an outsider by the crowd because he worked for Rome. They labeled him without knowing him. So they, not he, needed to be converted. Those in the crowd needed to see that Zacchaeus as a beloved son of Abraham, and a recipient of God's saving grace in Christ just as much as they were. By inviting himself over, Jesus open their eyes to this truth.

Whether Zacchaeus was a converted crook, or a misunderstood righteous man, doesn't really matter, however, when it comes to our understanding Jesus' actions. It is clear either way that Jesus intended to bring the Gospel of God's love to Zacchaeus, and did that by publicly sharing hospitality with him. This was what Jesus did throughout his ministry. He ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, and all kinds of perceived sinners. He invited 5,000 men and who-knows-how-many women and children— most likely strangers to each other— to dine together al fresco on a miraculous meal his disciples distributed. He allowed an uninvited guest to crash a fancy dinner party he was attending in order to cry on his feet and told parables about banquets to all who would listen. In other words, one of the ways that Jesus "plotted harmony" was through meals.

Knowing this, it's not surprising that when he was preparing for his death, Jesus left his disciples with instructions to repeat again and again a meal which proclaimed the Gospel of love, and the salvation given to all through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This wasn't a meal for righteous folk only— remember Judas shared the bread and cup at that first Lord's Supper. It wasn't a meal for only one kind of person either; the twelve disciples included among them a tax collector, some fisherman, a religious scholar, and political zealot— and despite Da Vinci's depiction, the upper room would have had plenty of women in attendance too, since they also followed and funded Jesus' ministry. The Lord's Supper was a meal for all designed to celebrate the reconciling power of God's grace in Christ, a meal designed to engineer harmony by bringing together all kinds of people who wouldn't normally be together, and feed them on grace and love symbolized by bread and cup.

As we can see from the epistle lesson from *1 Corinthians*, unfortunately, the meal hasn't always worked as intended since the Resurrection. When the Corinthians came together, their holy meal ended up being ruined by divisiveness, selfishness, and drunkenness. Some ate all the food and drank all the wine before others had a chance to have any. They jockeyed for the best seats, gave each other the cold shoulder, and challenged each other's righteousness. The harmony that Jesus had plotted was entirely absent. It's tempting to read this story and think, "Oh those foolish Corinthians, they just didn't get it." But it wasn't actually because the people were boorish or unfaithful that they behaved this way. It was because they didn't understand

initially that the meal was supposed to be subversive. They were mostly Gentiles who assumed that the heavenly banquet that Communion enacted would be just like any other Roman banquet.

In Roman culture, banquets were hugely important for sharing hospitality and doing business. But you couldn't just throw a dinner party and invite a few friends. There was an order to the proceedings, and a right way and wrong way to serve the meal. The dining rooms in most villas in those days could accommodate about nine or ten people who would recline for their meal. So, if you wanted a bigger party, the other guests would have to stand or sit in the atrium outside the house, which could probably fit another thirty or forty people. As a result, dinner geography became a big thing. The dining room was reserved for the wealthier and higher status guests, and the lower-status members were invited to eat outside. Describing one such banquet he attended, a Roman scholar named Pliny the Younger wrote, "The best dishes were set in front of the host himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends were graded), and the third for his and our freedmen."¹ This sounds harsh to us today but as contemporary historian and theologian Alan Streeb explains, to the Romans, making sure everyone was kept in his or her place was the way that "banquet harmony" was achieved.² Everyone got to eat and drink, even slaves, and strangers did mix together. But the acceptable social hierarchy was carefully preserved at all times. It would have seemed disharmonious to them to have slaves drink the good wine or laborers eating next to aristocracy. It would have been unseemly and therefore most unsettling.

Yet Jesus' meal asked the Corinthians to do just this, to recognize that there is no longer Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free in Christ. They didn't understand this initially. So, when they gathered for a meal, called an agape meal or love feast, that culminated in the Lord's Supper, the rich assumed they should have priority access to the best food and drink as was the custom. It didn't occur to them that they should wait for the day laborer's who couldn't arrive early, or eat next to them or slaves, or mingle with Jews. Thus, Paul had to teach them that when God is the host, the rules are different. The Lord's Supper wasn't a Roman banquet, it was a divinely commanded sacramental meal, like the Passover meal on which it was based, which was anti-Empire and anti-status quo. In order to dine together as Christ envisioned, they would have to be willing to subvert the expected order of things, mixing everybody up regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, or gender. Their meal was supposed to witness to the liberating grace of God in Christ, who crossed all of the standard boundaries. Therefore, the only way to achieve banquet harmony was through equality and inclusivity.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, tells a story in his new book Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times about when his father realized just how subversive the Lord's Supper was when it came to plotting harmony.³ When Curry's father was engaged to his mother, she brought him to worship at the Episcopal church she

¹ As quoted in Hays, Richard B., *First Corinthians, Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 192ff.

² Streeb, R. Alan, *Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord's Supper under Roman Domination during the First Century* (Pickwick Publications- An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Pub.). Kindle Edition, p. 24-25.

³ Curry, Bishop Michael, Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times (New York: Avery, 2020), 33-35.

attended in Chicago. In the 1940s, when Jim Crow laws were still in effect and the Church was even more segregated than it is today, the church his wife attended was almost entirely white. When it came the time in the service to have the Lord's Supper, congregants went forward to receive the bread, and, in that church, to drink from a common cup. Curry's father watched his fiancée join the line to move forward, thinking to himself, "This is where they are going to show their true colors. No way are they going to let a black woman drink out of the same cup as a white person." But when Curry's mother went forward, she drank from the cup like everyone else, and no one batted an eye, including the white people who drank after her from the same cup. In that moment, Curry's father had an epiphany not unlike the one Zacchaeus had, not in the sense that he was a converted from being a sinner, but in the sense that the good news of God's saving grace came to him through the meal in a way he had not previously received it. He realized that this wasn't just any meal, it was a foreshadowing of things to come. It was a heavenly banquet where all were invited and given equal access to the love and grace of Christ.

Today this holy meal has been tamed to such a degree that it doesn't shock many of the participants who share the feast, nor does it proclaim to the world as effectively as it should God's radical inclusivity or plotted harmony. The Church is still too divided. But it's important that we understand the goal of this meal anyway because every time we share this feast, at the very least it can remind us of the way that God wants things to be, and that can make all the difference. Then we become like the old man in the story who lived in a hopeless and desolate city. Every day he would walk outside and into the town square and shout out "love, peace, righteousness!" rain or shine like clockwork. Finally, one day the man's next-door neighbor who was tired of the daily yelling went out into the street and confronted the man. "Are you crazy?" he yelled. "What do you think you're doing? Every day you come out of your house and yell "love, peace, and righteousness." But nobody is listening to you. This city is full of hate and crime and hopelessness. There is no love of neighbor to be found, so give it a rest and save your breath! Don't you know you can't change the world?" The old man replied, "You are right. My yelling and shouting about 'love, peace, and righteousness' may not change the world. But it stops the world from changing me."⁴

Right now, our world is struggling with hate and hopelessness and divisiveness. We seem to have lost the ability to love our neighbors or even to like them, and to share what we have with one another. So, having a symbolic meal with denominations all around the world, many of whom understand the Bible and faith and God differently, even though we all use the term Christian to describe ourselves, is a big deal. It may not change the world, but with God's help, it can change those of us who partake. Gathered at this subversive table, one engineered by God to get us to come together with people we might otherwise never dine with or know, we are reminded that God doesn't agree with our social hierarchies and divisions. We don't get to share a common cup today as we ordinarily would. But don't let that convince you that this meal is powerless or pointless. Jesus designed it to keep our hearts open to the ways of the kingdom and our minds focused on Christ's teachings more than the world's. If we can hold onto the love, peace, and righteousness this meal proclaims, then we can witness to our world the importance

⁴ *Animating Illustrations*, cf "World Communion Sunday, HOMILETICSONLINE, www.homilecticonline.com/subscriber/illustration-search.asp?worldcommunionsunday

of these things even if the meal doesn't do so perfectly or persuasively. So, let us rejoice that Jesus has invited himself to dine with us today. He plotted moments like this long ago. May the harmony of the kingdom fill our souls, both for our sakes and for the redemption and reconciliation of our world. Amen.