

## Don't Invite a Prophet to Dinner

In today's reading from Luke, we find Jesus in a place where we might not expect to find him—at a dinner party in the home of a Pharisee. We usually think of Jesus as the man who ate with tax collectors and other assorted sinners, but here – and in other places in Luke – Jesus turns out to be an equal opportunity dinner guest.

This doesn't mean, however, that Jesus will turn out to be a model dinner guest. Because before dinner is even served a controversy erupts. Following the Pharisees' custom, everyone washes their hands before the meal—a ritual that wasn't about good hygiene, but was done as act of spiritual purification. Everyone does it, except Jesus, that is. And Jesus' host is amazed—shocked would actually be a better word.

This sets the stage for Jesus to say a few words. This story should be a warning for anyone who decides to invite a prophet home for dinner, because Jesus launches into a harsh denunciation of his host and his friends.

I have to admit that there's a part of me that has always felt a certain amount of sympathy for the Pharisees, especially as I've learned more about their pre-history in biblical times. Their view of their faith was formed by two big events in Israel's history.

The first was the exile in Babylon. According to the Old Testament prophets Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the temple was destroyed, and the people were exiled because they failed to obey the Lord's commandments. The second event was struggle against the Greeks who occupied Jerusalem in the time of the Maccabees—the story behind the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. The heroes of that time were known as the “Hasidim” -- the “pious ones”—who prevailed against their enemies because of their holiness.

The Pharisees were the spiritual heirs of the Hasidim, and their aim was to make sure that they did all that they could to obey the Law of God. In other words, do everything possible to avoid repeating the mistakes of their ancestors. That's why I can feel sympathetic – at the beginning they really wanted to do the right thing.

But this “defensive” approach to holiness has its pitfalls. If you've been watching the Winter Olympics at all, you've seen this dynamic at work. Tremendously gifted athletes get their moment on the world's ultimate stage to show off the results of a lifetime of training—their quadruple Salchows and cab double cork 1440s. But a person can't win Olympic gold if he's preoccupied with making mistakes, or if she's haunted by the fear of repeating a mistake she made four or eight years ago. Being too defensive and cautious robs a person of the joy and freedom and passion it takes to excel in that moment—to do something that's not just competent but amazing and even beautiful.

And that's Jesus' gripe with the Pharisees. What began as an honest quest to live in way that was pleasing to God had degenerated into a religion that was all about not making mistakes—about controlling everything they could. So to be on the safe side, they went so far as to require things that the Law didn't even require, like their rituals for purifying hands and cups.

But, as Jesus says in his indictment of them, a religion that wants everything to be under control has little room for “justice and the love of God.” Because justice and love are by their very nature messy things!

Justice can't operate under one-size-fits all, narrowly drawn rules. We've witnessed the tragedies of this in our nation's criminal justice system under the so-called Rockefeller drug laws, and mandatory minimum sentences, and three-strikes. Our prisons have been filled, but it's questionable how much justice has been done.

And love is the same way. The demands of love are often in tension with the rule book. Remember the story in the gospel of John where Jesus challenges the men who are about to stone a woman caught committing adultery. The angry men who surrounded her were just enforcing the letter of the law—but Jesus challenged them to take a deeper look at their own hearts and the demands of the law of love.

But notice, too, that Jesus doesn't tell the Pharisees to stop tithing! The problem wasn't that they were dedicated tithers. The problem is that limiting ourselves to the things we can control leads to shutting our eyes and ears and

hearts to all the things we can't control—and that ultimately means closing our hearts to God and our neighbors.

We can see this by just what a bad host this Pharisee was. Jesus comes into his house and instead of hospitality he offers criticism. According to Luke, the host didn't actually say anything—but he didn't need to for Jesus to get the point. People who want to be in control don't often invite strangers into their homes. Preachers who want to keep things under control don't often talk about controversial topics. Churches that want to keep things under control only take on safe projects and that aren't likely to bring criticism—or do more than scratch the surface of people's needs.

If that's strike one against the Pharisees, strike two involves their concern for appearances. They clean the outside of their cups but they ignore what's in their hearts. They put on a good face in public—they're the epitome of respectability. But Jesus says that although they look good on the outside they're actually dying on the inside. That's the point of Jesus' odd expression about them being unmarked graves that people walk over without realizing it.

The purity laws in the Old Testament law were very particular about people coming into contact with dead bodies—even indirectly. So Jesus was saying that the Pharisees' teaching was like a trap lurking beneath the ground. If the people who looked up to them followed their example, it would actually harden their hearts against God and their neighbors, too. They would all

become like the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan who saw a man in distress and walked away.

For strike three, the scribes—the teachers of the law—enter the conversation. They surmise correctly that when Jesus insults the Pharisees, he's insulting them, too. A big problem with the Pharisees' religion and its emphasis on not making mistakes, is that it wasn't enough for them just to watch out for their own mistakes—they had to make sure that no one else ever made a mistake either. And what's the best way to accomplish that? Rules and regulations.

Again, we know from our own experience what a two-edged sword that can be. We believe, for instance, that workplaces should be safe. And since we know that all employers won't just simply do the right thing, what do we do? Our legislatures pass laws, which are broken down into very specific regulations. And before long complaints come back the other way about excessive and burdensome regulations that make it impossible to do business.

In the religion of the Pharisees, the lawyers had broken down the Law of Moses into 621 specific rules. For example, the fourth commandment requires God's people to refrain from working on the Sabbath. But how do you know what counts as work? Ask a lawyer!

Jesus charges the lawyers with trying to control people by creating impossible demands. Under their system ordinary people ended up being called "sinners" just because they were poor. They didn't have the financial

means to own the right kinds of pots and cups that could be properly purified, or have access to the right water to wash their hands with, or they had no choice but to do their own chores on the Sabbath.

We may think that this story is about ancient history. But we may be in more danger of falling prey to this same sort of religion of control than might like to think. Our Presbyterian tradition has its share of emphasis on being in control. For one thing, we're masters at creating rule books. In recent years our denominational leadership has talked a lot about flexibility, but the latest edition of our constitution consists of two volumes that run to over 700 pages.

But we also share something else with the Pharisees. In economic terms, the Pharisees were among the middle class of their times. In the villages of Galilee and Judea they were the artisans and shopkeepers, they were the village elders and synagogue rulers. And although literacy was limited everywhere, they were among those were most likely to be able to send their sons to study the Torah. They had the economic means to have at least some control over their lives and futures.

Middle-class life today still has this strong element of being in control. We tend to believe that we can control our futures through hard work and education and financial planning. We teach our kids these values along with values like speaking correctly and dressing presentably—of looking good on the outside regardless of what's going on on the inside. And we worry about what will happen if we make a mistake—so we play it safe.

Middle class Christianity is prone to all these pitfalls. We bring those values into the church – we impose them on each other. We play it safe. As I said earlier, we are hesitant to invite strangers in who aren't like us. Our preachers steer away from controversial topics. We only take on safe projects that aren't likely to bring criticism—or do more than scratch the surface of people's lives. And we continually run the risk of being like Pharisees—looking good on the outside but unclean on the inside.

Jesus saves his harshest criticism for the way the Pharisees and scribes honored the prophets—making heroes of them, while ignoring the fact that their ancestors murdered them. It's like Americans glorifying Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass during Black History Month without being challenged by the witness of their lives and words.

There's no room for prophets in a religion that wants things—and people—to be under control. Because the ministry of the prophet is all about being disruptive—it's about proclaiming disturbing truths about the status quo, it's about proclaiming a vision of a future for all God's people that shakes up our existing patterns and our false sources of security.

But people – God's people – killed the prophets. And the story ends with Luke saying that the scribes and Pharisees went to war against Jesus that day—they began to look for a way to bring him down. Jesus was killed not because he was a healer, or because he was a great moral teacher, but because he was prophet.

It may seem to get buried in the story, but Jesus actually shows the Pharisees the way out. He says in verses 41, “So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.” He calls them to return to a religion that begins with the heart.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. It’s a season when we often talk about Lenten practices and disciplines—but approached in the wrong way those things can just make us better Pharisees. What is really needed is a renewal of our hearts. Instead of more control we may actually need less. May this Lent be a season of letting down our defenses and opening ourselves anew to the power of God's Word and Spirit. Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding  
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon  
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