

Unexpected Guests

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 9, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"All are welcome." How often we see these words on church bulletin-boards. In most cases the open invitation is sincere. But I wonder how many people outside the church notice. Does the average man or woman or young person really believe that they're welcome in the church. The average man or woman or young person outside the church probably feels that church is for "religious people." Worship services and Sunday School and Bible studies are assumed to be, not for everybody, but for a small group of people in our society who are religious - who like that sort of thing.

You can test this by asking yourself which of your friends you would be inclined to invite to come with you to church next Sunday morning (which, by the way, begins at 10 a.m. - there will be only one worship service during the summer and it will be held at 10 a.m. But) think of people who you might be apt to invite to a worship service. Wouldn't there be a group of people you would consider likely prospects, and another group you would write off as "not that kind of person"?

Have you ever noticed people walking down a street or driving by in a car on Sunday morning before the worship service? It's not too difficult to pick out the ones who are going to church. If this is so, then, is there something wrong? If all are welcome why is it usually so easy to identify those who are going to church and those who aren't?

The idea dies hard that you have to be "good" to come to church even though the Bible tells us exactly the opposite. I'm using "good" here with invisible quotes, meaning a kind of self-conscious respectability, a sense of moral superiority. Now I don't actually find that attitude in people who going to church. Most of us are here, not because we think we're morally superior to those who aren't here, but because we need forgiveness and cleansing from sin that only Jesus is able to give. But - I've often heard those who don't go to church say, "I'm just as good as those who goes to church." When I hear non-churched people say that it just underscores my feeling that most unchurched people feel that church is for people who think they're better than the unchurched; or that church is for religious people, but not for ordinary people with both feet on the ground; or not for cultured people who find all the spiritual nourishment they want in music and the arts.

We need to turn to the New Testament again to set our thinking straight. Listen to this incident from the Gospel of Matthew. "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' and he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

God and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Whom do we find Jesus welcoming at the party in Matthew's home? Religious leaders are there. And Matthew's friends and co-workers are there - some of whom had the reputation of being "bad characters". These, from the point of view of the religious leaders, were the unexpected guests. They just couldn't imagine how this rabbi, whose own life was unblemished, and whose teaching about goodness and honesty and purity was making such a mark on the country, could possibly associate with such people. They didn't belong. But Jesus seemed perfectly at home with them all. All were truly welcome. What seemed to matter to him was not any outward sign of religiosity or respectability.

He tells us what mattered to him. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

What Jesus looked for was a sense of need. That was all. It didn't matter to him what clothes they were wearing. It didn't matter to him what their position was in society. It didn't matter if the people were particularly religious. He was bringing to them the God who loves them and the only condition they had to meet was to need him and want him. When Jesus said that he didn't come "to invite the righteous" he meant those who thought of themselves as virtuous or righteous and therefore had no need of his message. He wasn't excluding religious people. He wasn't excluding upright, good people. He was pointing out that some people exclude themselves. You can't receive the

Gospel of God's mercy if you don't think you need it. You can't find forgiveness if you have no sense whatever of having sinned. The doctor can't do a thing for the patient who refuses to believe there's anything wrong.

The only quality Jesus looked for was need. That should be the only distinguishing mark of those we welcome to his Church today. These rough characters weren't unexpected guests for Jesus. He could see right through their hard exterior. He could see through their macho swagger or their cynical mask or their materialistic facade. He knew that even the most prosperous person, even the most despairing outcast, had a deep inner need that only God could supply through him. And he was there to heal them in his Father's name.

And that's what Jesus wants his Church to do. Someone once said to me, "It's terrible that bars are the two closest buildings to the church (That was when the Conquistador was located in the old Oxford Hotel)." Actually, there's hardly a better place for a church to be. The Church belongs where there's need. Of course, not everybody who goes to a bar is a problem drinker - but we usually think that the kind of people who go to bars aren't the kind of people who go to church. My only concern is that many of those who frequent the bars don't feel welcome in our churches. And it's not entirely our fault - we just have to advertise more through, not just in the newspaper, but by word of mouth and personal contact - that all really are welcome.

It would be wrong to leave this picture of Jesus with his motley crowd of guests without nothing this final point. I've talked about the welcome to all. But this isn't the whole story. Christ doesn't simply welcome us and send us away unchanged. The Church doesn't exist simply to provide a divine meeting place for all where we can feel comfortable and at home. The Gospel has a transforming power. Christ doesn't call us because we're good. He knows we're not. But he does call so that he can communicate to us some of his own goodness. It's not enough to know that we're welcome. We need to know also the cleansing grace of Christ, the redeeming love of God, the empowering fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That's what he offers; and this is what his Church still offers in his name.

Merciful God, you sent Jesus to eat and drink with sinners: be present with us, weak and sinful people; that, fed by your love, we may live to praise you, remembering Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.