

Proper 17C
Pentecost 14

August 29, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's

Jeremiah 2.4-13
Ps 81.1, 10-16
Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16
Luke 14.1, 7-14

As I am often wont to do, I was visiting this week about gardening and told by a couple people you can buy trees at the Airport Garden with a variety of apples or cherries on a single tree. I've heard about mixing citrus fruits all on one tree. And we used to have an "ornamental" tree in a garden that was the top of one tree grafted to the bottom of another. All that reminded me of today's Collect, which is one of my favorites and surely one of the most beautiful prayers in the Prayer Book. It dates from the 8th century and the Gelasian Sacramentary:

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; ...

Graft in our hearts the love of your Name. I had no idea how things are botanically grafted, so the Collect motivated a journey of discovery and theology.

First and foremost, grafting is a method of plant propagation where the tissues of one plant are encouraged to FUSE with another. One plant is selected for its roots, the other for its stem, flowers, or fruits. The vascular systems of each plant must connect with the other in order to become continuous.

Roses and fruit trees are commonly grafted. Some of the reasons for grafting are to provide more fruit, achieve higher quality fruits or blooms, increase the ease of propagation, make them generally more hardy or sturdy, or to repair damage to the trunk which might impair nutrient flow. Botany is starting to sound like theology...

One of the methods of grafting is to make a cut in the bark of the rootstock plant and gently open it to make room to insert the graft branch. The bark is then laid back over the top of the cutting to hold it in place and the entire graft is wrapped securely to allow the two to become one over the next weeks.

Graft in our hearts the love of your Name. Nourish us with all goodness and bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

What would it mean to graft into our hearts those things that Jesus is trying to teach us? Love of neighbor, love of God, compassion, service, and humility. Those things would no longer be external to us; they would be a part of us. The substance of each would mingle and grow together

until you could not separate one from the other nor tell them apart. The union would be complete; the graft would fuse. There would be a new identity. WE would have a new identity in union with God.

This does not necessarily mean that the two objects would be easily compatible. It is possible for grafts to fail. When Jesus went to the house of a leader of the Pharisees, it was a big event and they were watching him closely. We are tipped off that things are going to be tense. All the proper and important people were there. Chairs were propped up against the tables to save their spots in just the right place so that their position was secured next to all the right people. Everyone was in their best clothes with a cocktail in their hands, watching Jesus, waiting to see what he would do. They wanted to be grafted onto the ladder of success; one rung above the outsiders. One rung above you.

That's how it was supposed to be in the first century Mediterranean culture. If one was to be serious about keeping the traditional values of purity, you were to associate with people at the same place on the ladder, the same table, the same social hierarchy as you were. To invite the poor or crippled or lame or blind would have seemed blasphemous. The host would have been outraged; Jesus would have made no friends at this dinner party. Imagine a bunch of Episcopalians from Western Washington expecting entrance into the luxury skyboxes at the Mariner's game yesterday.

Luke knows all about meals and their importance. He has more meal time scenes than all the other evangelists. The table is about right relationship, about how we are to live in community and communion with one another, says Jan Richardson. Luke uses this everyday occasion to do more than portray Jesus as the Miss Manners of the Ancient Near East with good advice for social occasions. When Luke says that when Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor and "he told them a parable," that is code for: Pay attention here. All is not as it seems. The parable boxes in Godly Play look simple but they contain the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is not teaching us good manners and polite behavior in company. He is illustrating the communal fellowship in the Kingdom of God. A kingdom which Israel had rejected and for which Jeremiah prophesied. Kate Huey has a helpful understanding of Jeremiah's words. We hear God grieving when God says through the prophet: "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" Even after having been led out of Egypt and through the wilderness and desert to the land of plenty, Israel promptly forgot all of God's goodness and the covenant they made and "went after things that do not profit." Two evils were committed: they had forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water, and dug out cracked cisterns for themselves which can hold no water. And they are headed into exile for it. We forsake the Lord every time we step on another person on the way up the ladder does NOT lead to God. There is no ladder. There is only God.

I said to a couple people this week that as I read over Jeremiah and yet another difficult lesson this summer from Jesus about the deep challenges of living into the Kingdom of God, I'm ready for the sweet baby Jesus and Christmas! Just a little break from the hard news that trying to live a faithful life, the one to which God has called us, is not always very sweet.

There was an article in the paper by a pastor who bemoaned the apparent condition of many churchgoers who want their pastors to soothe and entertain them, leaving them comfortable and

feeling good about themselves each Sunday, rather than challenging them to grow spiritually, learn from Jesus and do it even when it is difficult. There are times when we really want the sweet baby Jesus or the Jesus with a little lamb around his shoulders. But the truth of the Gospel is that the sweet baby Jesus leads us to the Stations of the Cross and it got Jesus killed because it was so threatening to the status quo, because it tossed people off the rungs of the ladder, because it made room for everyone in the skybox. The wedding banquet, regularly used as a symbol for the reign of God, includes the poor and the less-than-perfect people we didn't want to invite.

Patrick Willson says Christ's calling disrupts the church's desire to get everything in order and returns us to the messiness and grace of invitation and welcome. There are no qualifications for being grafted onto this vine. David Lose writes that God has conferred upon us freely a dignity and worth we could never secure for ourselves; and we are free to do the same for others. Not because of what they can do for us, but because of what has already been done for all of us.

That must be our center; the love of God and neighbor grafted onto our hearts so that we might be more fruitful when we proclaim God's faithfulness even in the face of our transgressions, be more productive in the good works of the kingdom, and more sturdy when the harsh winds of the world threaten to loosen our graft and break off our faith. When we are grafted onto God, and God into us, nourished with all goodness, our life blood comes from God and the fruits of this divine union will be more than ornamental; they will feed the world.

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