

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1-7, 15-16 "To Be a Bearable Christian" August 28, 2016

When I went to college, many years ago, I became acquainted with members of two different Christian groups on campus. One was Campus Crusade for Christ, and the person talking with me told me that I was not fully Christian until I had formally accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. The other group was charismatic, and they told me that I was not fully Christian until I had been baptized with the Holy Spirit. Each group believed that IT had the right way, and the members tended to look down on Christians not of their own group. I liked both of them, because I really wanted to know Jesus, but it seemed to me that for each there was a certain amount of pride ("my" way is best!) and not so much love for those not in their groups. It hit me then and it hits me now: Why is it that Christians can sometimes seem so unloving?? These days, when the news reports on Christians, it's more often about a condemnation than something loving. For too many people, the word "Christian" has come to mean arrogance and criticism. In the gospel lesson, Jesus counseled his followers to have a very different way.

"When you are at a party," Jesus said, "take a low seat - don't take the most prestigious. You'll only be asked to move down to a lesser place." "When you give a party," Jesus taught, sitting as the honored guest at the dinner table of an influential Pharisee, "don't invite folks who can pay you back. Instead, invite those who are poor, or blind, or weakened in some way. By inviting those who can never repay you, you will be blessed." By doing something outside of the "tit for tat" rut, for someone who needs it, you will be rewarded as one who has honored God.

It's as though Jesus said, "When you give a party, invite to your feast the kind of people I would invite..."

By this, Jesus delivered a huge blow to those with whom he ate. He was talking to people who had lived their whole lives not only *by* the books but *by keeping* the books, keeping account, keeping score. "Let's be nice to these folks. They're on the membership committee at the club. Invite all the right people, and I might get a promotion out of it..."

They probably treated God in similar bookkeeping fashion. I'll do right so that God's records on me will tally up. I'll keep my life right, my children well behaved, my nose clean, so that God will have to approve of me. Through Jesus, God informed us that God does not operate by such bookkeeping. We cannot EARN or BUY God's love. God *already* loves us. Already and no matter what. The only thing we can do is receive God's love and then share it with others, in the same way Jesus did, with folks who can't pay us back. By this, we follow Jesus. (pause)

New Testament scholar Richard Hayes has said that the great hindrance to understanding the Gospel is our confusing the Gospel with what we call common sense. Often when we read a passage of scripture we say to ourselves, "YEP, that's what I have always thought. That makes sense to me." But Hayes warns the reader to beware, for the Gospel is filled with surprises—and if we agree with what we think it says too quickly, then we have probably misread or misunderstood the message that Jesus was trying to convey to us. Jesus came to challenge us, to that we can experience God's blessing and power in ways we do not expect.

We cannot “play” God. The only way to get through life well is to honor GOD. There is no other way. If we are banking on our money, our looks, our good health, our brilliant minds, or our great personalities, we're in trouble! The banquet table will become an embarrassment for us.

An author by the name of Carlyle Marney declared, “My Master intended His church to be a place where men (and women) become so much like Jesus that people would think they had seen him.” (*These Things Remain*, p. 137)

These days, when everything seems uncertain, it can be hard to put honoring God first. The anger and fear of our entire nation has become more and more evident, especially in the political arena and on the streets of our cities where racial tensions have been heightened by various police shootings and where fear of terrorism abounds. And we struggle in other ways. We cannot end the wars we've been in for too many years. Medical costs skyrocket as drug companies defend what seem to be outrageous price increases. Shootings and acts of crime are reported every day, and we worry over the safety of our children and grandchildren. We're tense, afraid, angry that things aren't better, so it may almost feel good to have a target against whom to vent. “Those liberals,” or “those conservatives,” or “those Muslims,” or whoever...

But as I read today's lesson, I can hear Jesus challenge us to invite the Muslim refugee, or whoever is on the “reject” list, to dinner. God's table will not be limited by our narrow, nervous ways. We who would follow Jesus need to make sure that we keep before us his actions and his teachings. We are to be bearers of Jesus' love, so that others can see it and find life and hope in it.

In the reading from the book of Hebrews, there are some teachings a lot of Christians would prefer to forget. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.” But today, doesn't Jesus know that we have to be careful about strangers? Our country might be overcome, or we personally could be robbed or murdered. It's SCARY to welcome a stranger these days. “Remember those who are in prison or who are being tortured.” Okay, we send cards to Daniel; isn't that enough? Others in prison may have done really bad things; we don't dare get involved with real criminals! “Keep the marriage bed undefiled; honor it.” Hopefully most of us do this... “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; in other words: TRUST GOD.” But think of all I could do, if I could just win the lottery!!! “Through Jesus, Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Okay. Maybe the dinner table etiquette is easier! Do not grab a special seat for yourself. That makes sense. And don't invite to your dinners folks who can pay you back. That's more difficult, but at least partially do-able.

In Jesus' day, though, this advice was totally upsetting to those who had power in society. Imagine today, walking into a fancy reception hall after a big wedding, heading over to the table

with all those place cards telling each person which table he/she is assigned to, and then mixing them all up with a permanent marker! Cross out the table 8s and put in table 1s, and do the same for everybody. NOT a friendly thing to do, especially to the bride's mother or whoever planned the whole thing! Such an action would cause confusion, chaos, and sure-fire upset.

Jesus was just as upsetting to those who had power when he spoke against the way things were.

Today, in 2016, we see how things are. People are pretty much out for themselves. Not that many folks wake up in the morning and declare, "Thank God for this day! How can I honor you, God, with my life today? How can I bear the love of Jesus to someone else today?"

Jesus's life tells us to go against what is "normal" these days. Do not put love of money or your career ambitions or even your personal safety before your commitment to trust and serve and honor God. Finally, everything but God will let us down. If we invest in less than God in our lives, we will lose out.

If we dare to ask God to show us how to bear his love and honor Jesus' teachings, we will find our lives to be abundant. Maybe not in worldly wealth or status, but in the things that really matter.

I often read obituaries these days. If someone is older than I am, he or she had a pretty decent life span. If someone has died younger or the same age I am, I feel some discomfort. That's just concerning the life-length. Over the years I have officiated at hundreds of funerals. I have listened carefully to family members and friends as they review the lives of their loved ones. Money can be a wonderful tool, very useful to help others. When it has been used in that way, there is much to celebrate in a person's life. When money has been hoarded or used pretty much for self, there is usually less to celebrate. The same for a person's time and involvements. It has become evident to me that human lives become rich and "bearable" when they aim to serve a larger purpose than themselves.

Christians, let us ask God to show us how to be bearers of love, forgiveness, acceptance and hope for others. Even when things are scary. Even when life seems limited. Why? Because we are called to follow the way of Jesus and to trust God to provide and to lead us. May people discover that we are Christians because of our love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Song to follow: "They'll Know We Are Christian By Our Love"