

October 10, 2004

"Suppose We Met Jesus"

Psalms 66:1-12; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

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INTRODUCTION

This morning I am inviting you to join me in attending a meeting. Oh, this is not your run-of-mill church meeting, I assure you. Church meetings sometimes feel like a necessary evil. People of the "congregational way," which is our heritage, must meet to discuss and decide on matters of mutual responsibility. Such matters, for instance, as whether to have donut holes or just cookies after each worship service on Sunday morning, or what color to paint the men's room just off the narthex. Probably, Colonial Church has never had those kinds of discussions in its church meetings, has it?

Believe me, I have attended my share of church meetings through the years. I have wondered and worried about how to help church meetings be energizing instead of enervating, spirit filled rather than spiritless. There have been some church meetings along the days of my ministry that were decisive, exciting – even transforming, personally and corporately. But there have been also church meetings that majored in minor matters and for the most part gave this one or that one an opportunity to pontificate or ventilate frustration from other areas of personal life. Of course, I have never pontificated or ventilated.

Church meetings sometimes deserve the bad rap they occasionally receive. I remember talking to my Methodist preacher father just a few weeks before his retirement. "How are you doing, Dad," I asked? "Well," said my Dad, "I'm not going to miss all the church meetings." Then he said, "meetings...I'm so tired of meetings. I get nervous these days when someone talks about meeting in heaven."

Well, this morning I am inviting us to a very different kind of meeting. There will be no agenda, no motions, no votes taken and there will be no minutes kept. It is a meeting with Jesus.

LUKE 17

This thought about meeting Jesus occurred when I read the suggested Gospel for this day's worship. In verses 11-19 we find 10 lepers approaching Jesus. "...Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'"

I invite us to use our imaginations now. Sometimes it helps me to close my eyes and turn to that inner silver screen where images and mental pictures dance at will. I have asked myself and I ask you now, where are we in this Gospel story? Are we on the sideline observing, perhaps? Or standing like one of Jesus' followers, tugging at his tunic suggesting that we do not have time to linger nor should we flirt with contamination of their dreadful scourge? Well, I have had the benefit of some previous moments to reflect and must tell you that I have found myself, not one of the twelve, but one of the ten. Oh, I don't have that ancient disease called, leprosy. But I do identify with their cry to Jesus, "...Master, have mercy on us..." on me! Isn't that the first reflexive posture when we draw near to Jesus?

HAS THERE EVER BEEN ONE LIKE HIM?

Somehow, as I imagine with you meeting up with Jesus, I am so uncomfortably aware of my shortcomings, my failures, my mistakes and inadequacies – when I step into the light of his goodness, his greatness – the stature of his humanity.

Last week I told you about the professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem who summed-up his estimation of Jesus in this way: "Jesus was the ultimate Jew...the ultimate rabbi...the ultimate human being."

This morning I add the words of Samuel Miller, one time Dean of Harvard Divinity School who, in his book, *Life In The Church*, compares Jesus to the likes of you and me. He says, "He (Jesus) was careless about himself, we are careful; He was courageous, we are cautious; He trusted the untrustworthy, we trust only those with good collateral; He forgave the unforgivable, we forgive only those who haven't really hurt us; He was meek, and we're ambitious; He had not place to lay his head and did not worry about it, we fret if we do not have the latest convenience manufactured by clever technology; He was righteous and laughed at respectability, we are respectable and smile at righteousness; He feared God but not the world, we fear public opinion more than we fear the judgment of God; He risked everything for God, we make religion a refuge from every risk."

I ask again, has there ever been one like Jesus? And is there anyone of us who can stand the scrutiny that is inevitable when we come anywhere near to the blazing brightness of his ultimate human example?

HUMILITY OF SPIRIT

There is a quiet humility that spreads among us in these moments as we simply confess the great gulf that exists between who we are and who we are called to be as people who have met Jesus.

Did you see the article in yesterday's Star Tribune, the Variety section on Faith and Values? Ruth Graham, the youngest daughter of Billy Graham, is quoted. She tells her story of struggling with clinical depression, attempting to hide her desperation from public view, thinking that admission of such darkness would betray the authenticity of her faith. She and others are coming out now to acknowledge the healing which has come through medication, therapy as well as prayer and wisdom from scripture.

How tragic that the Christian world has thought that we needed to pretend perfection because of our postured commitment to Jesus. Henri Nowen, a name familiar to you, I am sure, wrote a wonderful book titled, The Wounded Healer, in which he explores the reality of our humanness and the power of belonging to a community which practices honest admission of human need.

There is something therapeutic about belonging to a group which begins with utter honesty about our human struggles. Sometimes I am envious of you who belong to AA. There is such a deep sense of community that many of you experience resulting, I sense, from your common commitment to be utterly honest about yourself.

I must tell you that I have been having more fun than ever as an interim minister, because I feel more free than ever in my life to not pretend to be things I am not. You will become acquainted soon enough with my failures and inadequacies but I will not be among you long enough for you to feel the need to call them to my attention...Ah, there is a delightful freedom and ease that being fully aware of my interim nature affords. And, of course, in all reality, we are all only interim here, anyway.

So, now, perhaps you will join me in identifying with the ten who came to meet with Jesus saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

PRAYER

There is a second attitude that wells up within us when we come to meet with Jesus: Notice again the cry of the lepers. Is it not on second glance a form of prayer? "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Being around Jesus inevitably draws us into a posture of spirit called prayer. Sometimes the prayer is a cry of need and sometimes it is simply the heart pouring out a welling-up of gratefulness – like the Samaritan in our Gospel story who when he discovered he was healed, "turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him..."(vss 15 and 16)

One thing I have notice about you, Colonial Church folks, in my first full week with you, is that you are a prayerful people. I have not been surprised to find that your staff, when it meets together each Tuesday morning, is very attentive to the work and joy of prayer. But this week in every gathering at which I have been privileged to be present, there has been sincere prayer – not the perfunctory tip of the hat which sometimes is the prayer style of church meetings. For instance, last Monday evening the Deacons began with prayer but also concluded by gathering in a large circle, joining hands and sharing in an extended time of prayer.

On Friday morning I attended a gathering of about 40 men here at Colonial. We began with prayer and concluded with a time of prayer very similar to that of the Deacons, which I have mentioned. This has been very moving to me.

Next Sunday morning I will ask you to think with me about prayer – the importance of it and the way of it. Most especially I will ask you to pray for our church and world. Particularly, I will ask you to join me in asking God to guide and give discernment to the committee entrusted with the responsibility of calling our next Senior Minister of Colonial Church. I will ask us to seek God's gift of discernment, as citizens of this great country preparing to cast our vote on November 2nd.

DYNAMICS OF FAITH

At the conclusion of this morning's story Jesus says to the Samaritan who has returned praising God and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet as an expression of gratefulness, "...Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well." (vs 19) The verb translated here as "made well," is the same Aramaic verb which in other places in the N.T. is translated "to be saved." As one commentator on this passage suggests, we have here a story of salvation, a healing of spirit and of body...As Craddock says in the volume on Luke in the Interpretation series of Bible commentaries, "...What we have then, is a story of ten being healed and one being saved."

Notice now the components that lead to the Samaritan's new life. First, he came to Jesus with honest need. Second, he was obedient to Jesus' command. Notice, Jesus sent all 10 with instructions to present themselves to the Priests. "As they went they were made clean..." (vs 14) Third, the Samaritan returned to give thanks. May I suggest that these are the dynamics of faith?

Another thing I am becoming very aware of as I begin to share your life is your great desire to be obedient to Jesus way – to be faithful to him. I love the banners which grace our place of meeting and worship. These banners are quiet, faithful promptings about the vision of this place and people: "pursuing Jesus' dream; loving one another and serving the world; a covenant people..."

In the prayers which I have shared to which I have listened intently I have heard heartfelt need, petitions of willingness to be faithful and expressions of gratefulness for what God has done in your life and in the lives of those about whom you care so very much.

Friends, I have a clear sense that Jesus has honored and will affirm your prayers of need, of faithfulness and gratefulness. Jesus is affirming your vision for today and tomorrow at Colonial Church. We do not need to suppose we met Jesus. We affirm that we have met and will continue to meet him as we move into the next chapters of life together in the church.

CONCLUSION

So, let me give us a sign and symbol for our life together with one another and with our brother, Jesus. It comes in the form of a story which I found in a book by John Ortberg, titled: *If You Want To Walk On Water You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*.

Ortberg says, "I read recently about a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer and was given three months to live. Her doctor told her to make preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and told him how she wanted things arranged for her funeral service – which songs she wanted sung, what Scriptures should be read, what words should be spoken – and that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible.

"But before he left, she called out to him, 'One more thing.'"

"What?"

"This is important. I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand.' The pastor did not know what to say, no one had ever made such a request before. So she explained. 'In all my years going to church functions, whenever food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing dishes of the main course would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.'

"It was my favorite part because I knew that it meant something great was coming. It wasn't jell-o. It was something with substance-cake or pie-biblical food.

"So I just want people to see me there in my casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, what's with the fork? Then I want you to tell them, 'something better is coming. Keep your fork.'

"The pastor hugged the woman good-bye. And soon after, she died.

"At the funeral service people saw the dress she had chosen, saw the Bible she loved, and heard the songs she loved, but they all asked the same question: 'What's with the fork?'

"The pastor explained that this woman, their friend, wanted them to know that for her-or for anyone who dies in Christ-this is not a day of defeat. It is a day of celebration. The real party is just starting.

"Something better is coming..." (Ortberg, pp169-170)

And I want to say this morning to a people who have met Jesus – something better is coming. So, keep your forks...forks up everyone...forks up! Amen!