

Proper 19 C 2010

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Today let's start with a riddle:
How is a parable like an *amuse bouche*?

I can think of three ways.

First, not everyone knows
what either one is.

So, if an *amuse bouche* is a small,
One-bite foretaste of the meal to come,
A tiny, carefully crafted melding of surprising flavors
And colors and textures,
Intended to intrigue and delight,
And if a parable –
What is a parable?

We could spend a long time
Looking for the meaning of the word "parable."
But let's start here:
A parable is a story
In which truth plays hide and seek.
A parable is a story
Where concrete things and people and events
Help us get closer to an abstract truth.
A parable is a story,
And when we hear it,
Truth opens up inside us.

So,
How is a parable
Like an *amuse bouche*?

Two ways.
First, context matters.

The plate the *amuse bouche* comes on
Is part of the event.
And the setting of the parable really matters.

Again, how is a parable like an *amuse bouche*?
In this way:
Both are best swallowed whole.

When the tasty little morsel arrives in front of you,
You can choose to pick it apart,
To identify the different elements and ingredients,
And eat each one by itself.
Or you can take a bite,
And notice the surprise of flavors and textures
You might never have thought to put together,
And perhaps pause a moment
In recognition, even gratitude,
For the imagination and skill
Of the one who made it.

It is the same with a parable.
When you hear it,
You can choose to pick it apart,
To assign meaning to each separate element and character,
And then make something out of the scattered pieces.

Or you can take the whole thing in one bite,
Enjoy the surprise,
And perhaps even say,
I never would have imagined that.

Jesus invites us,
Over and over,
To imagine something new
When we get inside his parables,
Or when they get inside of us.

Today, he invites us to imagine –
What?

What is happening in the stories
Of the lost sheep and the lost coin,
Two parables that speak of joy?

First of all,
Remember that context is important.
When does Jesus tell these stories?
When the religious leaders of his day grumble,
“this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

One thing you can say,
They have really understood the mission
And the message of Jesus.
They don't like it, but they understand it.

Jesus' mission is to find those who are left out,
Left over, left behind,
And bring them to the party.
Jesus' message is this –
Everyone is welcome at the table.
Everyone.
There are no sinners in the house of God.
It is a term that no longer has any meaning.

If sin is anything that separates us from God,
And sinners are those who experience separation from God,
Then, by definition,
Those who are in God's house,
Eating at God's table,
Are not sinners.
And since Jesus invites and welcomes all of us
While we still believe we are separated from God –
Sinners, some would call us –
As if he didn't think it mattered,
And since we cannot be called sinners
If we are eating with God,
It must be that at the moment of welcome and eating together
The sin recognizes its irrelevance, and slinks away.

Sin really does matter.

And it really doesn't.

We can talk more about sin another day.
There will always be plenty of it to go around.
There will always be plenty of people,
You and me among them,
Doing things on purpose or by accident,
Things we know
Will grieve those who love us,
Ruin our health,
Make us feel like running away from the truth.
There will always be plenty of people
Who indulge in cruelty and violence,
As they themselves have been victims of cruelty and violence,
Or carelessness, or neglect.
There will always be people
Who want to burn Korans,
Or Bibles, or the sacred texts or objects
Of those they revile.

There will always be corporate structures
That value their own success
Over the well-being of the people within them.
There will always be vast, untamable powers
That threaten chaos and confusion.
We will always experience an unbridgeable,
Unfathomable gap opening up before us.

At least as long as we experience life
In time and space, there will be within us
that which makes a division
Between us and God,
Or the world and God,
A division we can call sin.

It will be there,
So there will be another chance to talk about it.
Not today.

Today, as we encounter these parables,

we have another task,
and that is asking,
What is the plate on which the parable is served?

For Jesus,
The plate, the context,
Was his condemnation by those who found it unthinkable
That he would overturn one of the foundations
Of the religion of his day:
The purity principles
That kept some people away from the table.

For us, what is the plate?
It's a plate with many designs intermingled,
A complicated context.
Koran burnings,
Anxiety about an Islamic center
Near ground zero,
Increasing polarization over immigration issues,
Loss of jobs to workers far away,
These are some of the things we see
On the plate that holds the parable.

How do we hear these stories of losing and finding
In the midst of a world that looks like this?

What is Jesus talking about,
When he tells this parable to us?

Today, let's recognize that in the parables we've just heard,
Jesus is talking about joy.
Joy in heaven, joy on earth.
Joy when the lost is found,
Joy when the left out are welcomed in.

Listen to these parables as stories of joy.
Remember what it is like to find or be found.
Imagine what it is like to have Jesus come
And take you by the hand,
And say,

You are the one I want at my table.
Come and sit down and eat with me.
You, and everyone else.
Everyone. All together.

Take these stories,
Enjoy them,
Admire them,
And then eat them in one bite.
Hear Jesus say, "Rejoice with me."

This is why we are here, to rejoice at the table together.

Together, in community,
We are Jesus' guests at his table,
And we act as hosts in his name.

We are Christ's body now in the world.
His mission and his message are ours now.
That means we are here
Not only to rejoice at the table,
But to help him prepare the table,
Making sure there is room for all,
And to help him find and invite the guests.
We are hosts as well as guests.

There are many parables
That show us ways to make that real.
Today, those parables
Speak of losing and finding,
Of welcome and sharing,
Of going out to find the lost
Who are far away,
And lighting a lamp to find the lost
That is right under our noses.

Looking within,
And looking beyond.

For some time now you at St. Andrew's,

And now I with you,
have been asking questions
And listening,
Seeking the vision
That speaks of who we are
And where we're going.
There are many ways to say it.
We have been looking within and without,
Looking at ourselves
And looking for our neighbors.

We are looking for ways to tell the story
So that it brings joy to us and to others,
Because when we know joy,
We know God is there.
Joy is the sure sign
Of the presence of God.

As we gather here today,
Let's see ourselves
Through the lens of joy.
As we gather at the table,
As we go from the table
To the many tables downstairs,
Where we celebrate our many ministries,
Let's look at ourselves
And see joy.
And then,
Let's ask,
Who and what is missing?
Where do we need to look?
Who and what will we find?

We don't know yet,
But when we find it,
We will know.

We will know,
And we will say,
As Jesus says,

I have found what I had lost.
Rejoice with me.