

## SERMON

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, 2016

Good Shepherd, Charlestown; Trinity Anglican Church, White River Junction, Vermont.

Let us Pray: O Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy Church and household continually in thy true religion; that they who do lean only upon the hope of thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Imagine God walking into a room. Put it another way; Jesus walked into a room. Or, maybe a third way: Jesus came to the house for dinner. Sounds like the opening to a joke. Or, perhaps, the beginning of a play in the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd. Well, this is no contemporary joke or a theatrical entertainment. It is the beginning today's gospel message: "Jesus went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day." Jesus went to visit a honcho, a mucky muck, a pooh bah on the sabbath. Well, maybe there is something a little lighthearted about this opening sentence. Maybe even a little absurd. Jesus, God among us, visits the house of someone who has done well in this life. He has succeeded by every worldly calculation. And here comes God; to dine at his table. Impossible to believe. And yet, that is exactly where the concept of Theatre of the Absurd comes from.

Edward Albee, one of the practitioners of Theatre of the Absurd, died just a few days ago. He had written such classic, if troubling, plays like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" and "The Zoo Story." Those of us who studied theatre for the last fifty years became very familiar with such plays.

And I think Edward Albe would have grasped immediately the sense of absurd drama implicit in this little scene from St. Luke's

gospel. Then, to add to the absurdity of the scene, in walks a man with dropsy. The man has Edema. Edema – commonly called dropsy - is a painful accumulation of fluid in what is called the interstitium. That's located located beneath the skin and in the cavities of the body. So here is our scene: a rather well dressed, prominent Pharisee, Jesus and this man with a painful illness. No doubt everyone is very polite. They're Pharisees, after all. The man with dropsy, suffering from his painful illness, no doubt cries out in pain from time to time. Talk about a conversation-stopper.

We sometimes take the gospel very seriously. And, of course, we should. The message is always about God's love. But the message is not always presented in serious “voice of God” tones. God has a sense of humor. The old saying goes: God sure does have a sense of humor, after all, He created us.

So let's look at this scene. In Edward Albee's version of the play, Jesus enters this chapel. Right now. Today. He looks around. Then he invites his friend, the man with dropsy, to sit with him. They come in right in the middle of the sermon. They are noisy. They don't genuflect. And the man with dropsy utters loud sounds of agony, particularly during the preacher's best lines. This happens a lot. The preacher gets a little frustrated. The preacher starts wishing these rowdy strangers would go away and let him get on with the real business of doing church.

That's when Jesus interrupts him and asks if he might take a few minutes and heal his friend. He asks: “is it right to heal in the middle of church?” Not one of us knows what to say. So Jesus takes the man

with dropsy by the hand. He leads him to the foot of the altar and heals him. Then, the man leaves, praising God. Jesus then turns to us and asks: “Is it right to heal on the Sabbath Day?” We are all so shocked by what has happened, no one can answer. Then Jesus takes a seat. He sits down right there in that chair and looks at the congregation. He studies each one of us. Finally, the preacher, who has regained his voice, says to Jesus: “Excuse me, sir, but that is my seat.”

Jesus looks a little stunned at this, but rises and asks: “Just who does this chair belong to?” And the preacher answers: “Well, it belongs to the Church.” Jesus smiles and says: “That's good.” But the preacher adds: “Well, it belongs to the Church, but it is reserved for the bishop.” Jesus stops smiling. He looks puzzled. Then He asks: “What's a bishop?” Then He sits on the floor.

The celebrant is a little flustered. But he decides to continue with the communion service. When the consecration section begins, the host is elevated and the words are spoken. Jesus leaps to his feet and yells out: “What are you doing?” The celebrant is tempted to invite this stranger to an upcoming instructed Eucharist where all questions will be answered. But he is a good pastor and patiently explains that this is in remembrance of how Jesus appeared during a Passover meal. Jesus thinks about this for a moment, then says: “Ok. But I didn't do it exactly like that. Would you like me to show you?”

Would you like me to show you? Whenever Jesus asks this question of the ancient Pharisees – or of us today, the answer always has to be: “Yes.” It is from Jesus that we receive much of what we

seek to do in this world. As faithful Christians. It is to Jesus we look

-4-

for all guidance in love and healing and truth.

God does, I believe, use all creative methods to help us understand our purpose in this world. He will use every vehicle at his disposal to help us grasp the fullness of his love. He will heal the sick, perform miracles, create the Church, teach us what it is to love. He will even go to the cross.

Yet, what is it that will open our hearts and minds fully and completely to the intense reality of that love? Perhaps it will be the reality of the Gospel message as we come to embrace it in all its depth of understanding. The gospel is not a dry and lifeless document. It is a living witness to the presence of God among us. The God who has created us, loves us, seeks to teach us His way; the God who can weep with us and laugh with us. The God who has created us in His image. Part of that image includes laughter. And it is laughter that comes from the depths of His love.

What will we do when Jesus comes to our feast? Brothers and Sisters, this is His house. He can sit wherever He wants. And He can show us where to sit as well. Within this house, He can heal us. And above all, He can show us what it is to love.

Amen.