

Christ Invites: RSVP – February 14, 2010 – Transfiguration Sunday
Romans 1: 18-21; 1st Corinthians 1: 10-13; 3: 1-4; 1st Corinthians 11: 17-29

The Bible is not in the least bit shy about chronicling the many ways we humans hate each other... hurt each other... conspire against each other... seek each other's harm and ruin... take from each other... harass, beleaguer, and disable each other.

Cain killed his brother Abel, you might remember. And when God confronted Cain about the murder, Cain added to his hateful deed, by asking God, in so many words, "What's it to you? And then asking, "Am I my brother's keeper," thus being the first of us to openly express indifference to another person's suffering.

Through an act of trickery, spurred on by all people his mother, Jacob stole the birthright that was rightly due to Esau his brother. Why Jacob did such a thing we can only wonder. But we do know how Esau responded to being tricked and denied. He took daily comfort in planning his brother's murder.

King David had a thing for Bathsheba, who was inconveniently married to someone else, David's general Uriah. David got Bathsheba pregnant. To find the quickest and easiest way out of the mess that he made for himself, David came up with a foolproof plan – put Uriah in the front lines of battle where he surely would be killed. And, sure enough, Uriah was killed.

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And so it goes... and goes... Murmuring and mutiny against Moses in the wilderness... King Saul's obsessive jealousy of David... Even the Apostle Paul, before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, was reported to have held the coats of the mob who stoned young Stephen to death on the outskirts of town.

And, of course, there was that crowd in Jerusalem who one day shouts Hosanna and on the next day cries out "Crucify."

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And yet, as unsparing as the Bible is in detailing the many ways we are capable of being hateful and hurtful to each other, the Bible is no less attentive to our need to repent- **to turn our lives around, entirely** - for our hearts to be softened and our consciences awakened... to be made aware and most especially to be held accountable for the hateful and horrible and even neglectful and questionable things that we do... to make amends... **to reconcile**... that is to say, to make a separate peace with one another... to forgive even as we seek forgiveness. Perhaps to never fully forget, but, yes, to fully forgive...

When Jacob heard that his brother Esau was fast approaching his way, he was justifiably afraid, for all that he knew about Esau all those years is that Esau planned to kill him. But when Esau saw his brother Jacob from afar, Esau ran to him, embraced him, forgave him, and the two brothers wept at the pain that had been caused and the damage that had been done and the years that had been wasted.

When the prophet Nathan confronted David with the sin he had committed in sending the Uriah to a certain death, David took full responsibility for what he had done. David repented aloud of his ways, saying, aloud, “I have sinned against God.”

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When Jesus speaks about the hurt that we inflict upon each other, Jesus points to the source of our sin – **that is to say, our hearts** - saying in Matthew’s Gospel, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, you shall not murder. But I say that if you are angry, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister you will be held accountable; and if you call someone a fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So, before you come to the altar, first be reconciled to your brother and sister whom you have harmed.”

And we find Jesus, surrounded by the mob in the Garden of Gethsemane, responding to the kiss by Judas his betrayer by saying to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Do you think Jesus’ use of the word “friend” to the one who was delivering him into the hands of those who would beat and scourge and crucify him was some lame form of sarcasm? Or was Jesus offering friendship and forgiveness to his betrayer even at the moment he was being betrayed?

The answer to that question, I believe, comes from the Cross: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.”

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There are four passages from Paul’s letters that we have heard this morning.

The first passage, from Paul’s letter to the house church in Rome, states quite plainly that we who say we are believers really have no excuse for the hurtful things that we do to each other or for the dangerous and wasteful and harmful – and tragic – and yes, sinful – things that we just do.

Beginning with the 20th verse, Paul tells us, “Ever since the world was created, God’s eternal power and divine nature – as invisible as it may be – was seen and understood through God’s work, through the things that God has made,”

So there simply is no excuse, Paul says. **We know God.** We know something about the nature and character of God. **But we do not honor God.** We do not give God our thanks and we certainly do not give God the glory. **We do not take God all that seriously.** In fact, when it comes to our relationship with God – or at least the commandments and covenants of God – we seem to be able to take it or leave it.

Later in that same passage, still chapter one, verses 25 through the chapter’s end, Paul catalogues the consequences of our disrespect and disregard for God, saying this:

“Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, they were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, and malice. They were full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness. They are gossips, slanderers, rebellious towards parents - foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.”

We know better, Paul says. Or at least we should.

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The other three passages, most of them short passages, all come from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth and all three of them, each in their own way, speak about divisions in church – hurtfulness among and between believers – that is to say, those of us who should know better.

You know, I could just as easily, picked up this Bible, and, beginning with Romans, I could have flipped through the pages of this Bible all the way to Revelations, I could have stopped anywhere; and I would likely have found any number of passages speaking about the very same thing: divisions in the church; one example after another of rudeness, hurtfulness, envy, strife, craftiness, gossip, indifference to others, impatience, arrogance, and envy – all those things that Paul in 1st Corinthians 13 says that love is not - and all those things that Paul in Romans says occurs when we cease to listen to God.

And the fact that I could do this - look sometime at Galatians or Colossians or Ephesians – speaks volumes about the sad and sorry fact that often the worst damage we Christians do is the damage that we do to each other. And we know better, Or, at least we should.

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Which brings us to how this time of worship began, with Jesus' invitation for us to join him in fellowship at His table.

We know those words. We hear them every month when we celebrate communion. They are listed on page 12 of the hymnal. "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sins, and who seek to live in peace with one another."

Let me now repeat those words... "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sins, and who seek to live in peace with one another."

Christ invites. Jesus doesn't order or insist. You don't have to be part of this thing called church if you don't want to.

And any of us certainly could come to this altar table, kneel or stand at the altar rail and eat a piece of the bread and drink the little cup of grape juice and still not love God – to take or leave God, in fact.

And we could come up here - we do this every month, as you know – and still not reflect upon how we have sinned against God and our neighbor. We could say out loud the words in the prayer of confession because that's what we do every month and still not truly desire to turn our lives around.

We can come up here – any of us can come to this table knowing full well how we have been hateful and hurtful to someone throughout the past week – or the past month - or year, for that matter, knowing how we have slandered and gossiped, how we have been rude or arrogant - how we have helped to divide and weaken rather than unite and strengthen the body of Christ.

We can do all that. We can cheapen Jesus' invitation to us. We can decide that receiving communion is like having an American Express card, that membership has its privileges. **But, why, why in God's name, would we want to?**

In the passage that we heard from the 11th chapter of Corinthians, Paul writes this: "Examine yourselves; and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves."

When Paul speaks of "discerning the body," he is speaking about us, the body of Christ. Communion is not a solitary act meant to charge our individual batteries. Communion is something we do together. That's why we call it communion.

So, again, we can come to this table apart from others, estranged from others, at odds with others, **but again, why in God's name would we want to?**

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I have a dear friend who hates his brother-in-law and his brother in law hates him. Most of the time... well, to be honest with you, it's at best some of the time, they are able to maintain a certain level of civility with each other.

But more often than not, well, stuff happens as they say... Words are exchanged. Tempers flare... and the next thing you know, someone is trying to run the other over with the tractor.

When things like that do happen, they bother my friend greatly; and he will sit in the pew at church and not come forward to receive communion. You see, he feels that he cannot accept Jesus' invitation to table when at that moment he knows that he has no desire to live in peace with his brother in law.

You may not agree with his decision. I'm not sure that I agree with his decision entirely. But I have to respect the fact that he takes this invitation from Jesus seriously, that he is doing what Paul has asked us to do: to examine ourselves; to carefully think through what we have done to build up – or what we may have done to tear down the body of Christ...

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We Methodists don't "fence the table" – that is to say, we are quick to publicly announce that everyone is welcomed to participate in communion - that it really is a come as you are event. And I suppose that in many ways that makes sense and has some merit.

But I wonder what communion would be like - what our church lives would be like; what our personal lives would be like - if we took Jesus' invitation to have fellowship with him as seriously as we take other invitations that we receive.

Not every event is a come as you are event. There are expectations for how to dress, what to say, how to behave. And there is often the courtesy of an RSVP, of letting the person who offered the invitation know that you plan to attend.

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Soon, you will be invited to come to Christ's table... but not before you are invited to share Christ's peace with others.

I ask you to use that time for prayerful reflection. Examine your life - your life at home, at work, at school, in this church - and then ask yourself... how am I building up...how am I tearing down the body of Christ? Am I an instrument of peace? Or am I an instrument of division and hurtfulness? Am I merely an infant in Christ, as Paul describes divisive people, or am I prepared to truly grow in grace?

And that use that moment to make peace with others: to make amends; to share a hurt; to hope for some healing; to weep together as Jacob and Esau did; to truly and openly repent as David did - to forgive as Jesus did... as Jesus does... as Jesus always will.

Receive and respond to Jesus' invitation with humility and hope and with a desire that all hurts are healed. And then come to this table with confidence, thankfulness, and with joy. Jesus invites. RSVP. Please respond. **Amen.**