

Sermon, July 9, 2023

Matthew 11:6-19, 25-30

“Was Jesus a Glutton and a Drunkard?”

Jesus was never popular with the religious authorities of his day, and we can see why! He was known to sit at the table and share a meal with drunks, tax collectors, and prostitutes. What a terrible guy! He was known to have stood before a crowd that was about to stone a woman to death, for committing adultery, and said, “Let that one of you who is without sin cast the first stone!” Such audacity!

Did he believe that all people have worth in the eyes of God? Did he believe that mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and love play an important role in human relationships? What a crazy idea.

Surprisingly they didn't stone him instead!

Of course, I'm being facetious. We have a saying in the UCC that appears every week on our bulletin. “Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!” This must never be just words - a clever slogan. It must reflect the church's reality. When we say whoever, you are, or wherever you are, we must mean it in all sincerity. Jesus did, and we must always be a people of extravagant welcome, following his example.

I have always been pleased by the welcoming attitude in this congregation, and pray that we will always remain that way; but sadly, there are churches in this country who are not so accommodating. And throughout the history of the church too many have been littered with walls and barriers.

Back in the 1930s, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book on the social sources of denominationalism, recognizing that beliefs and doctrine have certainly contributed to the many splits and divisions with Christianity, but it may be the case that social barriers have played an even greater part. Issues of race, ethnicity, class, etc. have separated us. Whites worshipping with whites, blacks with blacks, Asians with Asians, Hispanics with Hispanics, the rich with the rich and the poor with the poor. It has been said that 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour in America. It's getting better in some churches, but there is still a long way to go.

In terms of beliefs - some years ago I was a member of an Episcopal Church that was part of the Charismatic Movement, but then I moved to another city. One Sunday I decided to drive up and visit my former church. At the fellowship hour a woman approached me and asked what I had been doing. I told her I was in my first year at Yale Divinity School. She looked at me skeptically and said, “When they are through with you come back and we will tell you what

Christianity is really all about.” It made me angry, but even more so it made me sad that there are those in the Church who believe they have cornered the market on Truth and condemn those who do not believe the same way they do. The Church must be open to a diversity of thought and beliefs.

Most of you know that before I came here, I was the Senior Pastor at a church of just over 500 members. Add in the Korean Congregation that shared our building and it was more like 700. I would estimate that 95% of the members were either 1st or 2nd generation immigrants from all over the globe. I was also very aware that some of them were not in the country legally. But my personal policy was - there are no papers required in the house of God. What takes place beyond the walls of the church is beyond my control, but all are welcome in God’s house! I knew their stories, I was aware of the horrors that they were escaping, and most of all I knew that Jesus would not hesitate to sit at table and break bread with them! All are welcome in the house of God!

Bringing up another issue - you may be surprised to know that I hold the Roman Catholic Church in high regard. Of course, there are issues with which I disagree with her, but she is our Mother Church. We all trace our Christian heritage back to her. I have attended Mass in Catholic Churches, I’ve sat and prayed with Franciscan and Benedictine monks, I’ve even preached a sermon at a funeral in a Roman Catholic Church. However, I will not partake of communion in a Roman Catholic Church - that is - not until the day that the Vatican tells me I am welcome at the table. When that day ever comes, I will be the first to go and kneel at the altar!

This table is not a Roman Catholic table. This table does not belong to the UCC, the Episcopalians, Lutherans, or Presbyterians. This table belongs to Jesus Christ, and he never said, come to me all of you with the right beliefs or the correct religious credentials. He said, come to me all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens - and there are few that do not fit that category to one degree or another.

When I stand behind that table, I am fully aware that Jesus sits at the head of the table. I am just the maître d’ and the maître d’s job is to lead people to the table, but God have mercy on my soul if I should ever say to anyone, you are not welcome at the Lord’s table!

A few years ago, a member of this congregation, who has since passed away, came to me in private and confessed that she did not believe in God. Did I tell her that she was no longer welcome here? Of course not! In fact, I admired her for her honesty. A church should be a place where anyone, atheist, agnostic, or someone who describes themselves as spiritual but not religious, should be able to come and explore and ask pertinent questions- a place where they can find the support of a loving community regardless of their beliefs. If the Holy Spirit awakens them to a different way of thinking, wonderful, but, if not, I still think Jesus would embrace them and call them his friend!

Was Jesus a glutton and a drunkard? Yes, he was! He was a glutton for justice, peace, and harmony, with an enormous appetite for mercy, forgiveness, and healing for body, mind, and soul. And he was drunk with the Spirit of God having a thirst for caring for those who suffer in many ways!

We now live in a new age, a time when our society is turning more secular every day and the Church needs to change with the times, to open its doors wider, to show the world that the love of God is for everyone, and not for a chosen few. This does not mean we have to let go of our own sacred beliefs. In fact, we should embrace them more deeply, because that is where the essence of divine love resides - and we must really mean it when we say, "Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. " Amen.

**Let us pray:** We give you thanks, Eternal God, for those who have run the race of faith before us and now surround us like a cloud of witnesses. We thank you for those who pass the word of your love to each new generation. We thank you for martyrs and saints who give themselves in love for you and in the pursuit of peace and justice on earth. We give you thanks, infinite God, for the church around the world, and pray for its unity and renewal - and we ask for your blessing upon our congregation. We thank you that we count as our brothers and sisters in Christ, people of all races, tongues, and nations, and pray for greater understanding with the world's other great religions. With faithful people of all ages, may we be Christ's body on earth, for it is in the name of Christ Jesus that we pray, remembering to you...Amen.