

The Heart as Welcome Table

Sermon for the fifth Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2024

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33; Psalm 51:1-13

Sermon text: But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Jeremiah 31:33

One day, Jeremiah tells the house of Israel, after the calamities of defeat and exile he has prophesied have come to pass, God will write a new covenant on the hearts of the people.

What is this heart Jeremiah talks about?

In the Bible the heart is a metaphor for the inner self, the center of man's psychosomatic life, the inner personality, the "I" in its very depth—never the emotional side of man alone as sometimes in the West (and of course not the bodily organ). And in the Bible body and mind are a psychosomatic unity—a living soul—so that it is inconceivable that, as in Plato, one can imagine a flight of mind from the body into a pure realm of ideas. No, the spiritual concern is not to escape multiplicity and change and the material world but to bring all of that—all of creation—back into harmony with the creator—and create—co-create—a whole, a fullness, a dynamic peace.

And the heart, as Jeremiah sees, is where the work has to be done. It is not enough to know with the mind or make sacrifices with the body but to bring the whole self, inner and outer—to the table and join the eternal feast of God.

The heart and the welcome table.

The early fifth century master of spiritual practice, St. Macarius of Egypt, who first coined the term *prayer of the heart*, wrote that the heart is "the table where the grace of God engraves the laws of the Spirit."

Let's explore the idea of the heart as the place—the table—where the self meets God and God welcomes the self and in turn the self is freed to welcome the world—fulfilling the the covenant established in creation, with Israel and with all people—the covenant of love between God, humanity and restored creation.

We may picture this restored harmony as the wedding feast pictured in Isaiah 25 the parables in Luke 14, Matthew 22 about the wedding feast, and the marriage of heaven and earth that concludes the Bible (Revelation 21). The heavenly banquet is also sacramentally understood as the Eucharist. And just as before the meal comes the preparation—the invitation, the cooking, the washing of hands and setting of table, so

Baptism and conversion of the spirit—prayer and works of mercy—prepare us for the feast.

First of all comes the invitation, and it comes from God. It comes from the love of God.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.

So begins George Herbert's great poem *Love (III)*. "Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back guilty of dust and sin." Guilty of sin we easily comprehend, but guilty of dust? Perhaps guilty is an odd way of putting that condition of our soul which becomes, like our house if left untended and uncleaned simply dusty, not a result of use but of disuse, of a lack of regular care. A layer of dust settles on the old furniture. A fingertip reveals it. The mirror or the window do not let the light shine in fully, or perfectly reflect the image before it. We are made in the image of God but if our souls grow dusty, then that image is obscured—an old metaphor of spiritual sloth.

The poem goes on as a dialog between the soul and God, personified as Love. The soul invited to the welcome table feels unworthy, ungrateful, "I cannot look on thee" — but "Love took my hand and smiling did reply who made the eyes but I?"

"But I have marred, let me go to that shame I deserve"—do you not know, replies Love — "who bore the blame?" The debt was paid on the cross, Christ has cleansed the soul of guilt and dust. "I will serve then" says the soul. No, replies Love—"you must sit and taste my meat." This is God's welcome table—God himself will serve (see Luke 12:37). The poem concludes: "So I did sit and eat."

Two stories come to mind when I think of this poem and the image of the welcome table. The first is a story I recently heard is about the French writer and spiritual seeker, Simone Weil (1909-1943)—brilliant and great-hearted, born to secular Jewish parents and politically a Marxist, but throughout her intense and tortured life in love with Jesus. She wrote about this poem in her *Spiritual Autobiography*, "Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache," she wrote. "I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines... It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me."

Her soul became the welcome table for the visit and radical presence of Christ through the recitation of a poem, a sort of prayer, in which Love invites her to God's welcome table.

The second story is about James Baldwin, from whom I take the phrase welcome table. He learned it as a figure in African American spirituals referring to our welcome in

heaven. It was Baldwin's custom, as one biographer puts it, "to open his home to a 'full retinue of intimates,' with guests ranging from A-list celebrities to 'unknown artists, poets, musicians,' by way of 'friends from the village' and 'casual acquaintances.' All were invited to break bread and exchange ideas around Baldwin's so-called 'Welcome Table,' with little heed paid to guests' wealth and status."

The Welcome Table was the title of a play he was working on at the end of his life. Baldwin had moved to Saint-Paul de Vence in Provence in 1970, reeling from the assassinations of Martin King, Malcolm X and the earlier death of his friend Medgar Evers—he had known all of these men—and seen so many of his other die that he felt he could only do his work, his writing in the safety of exile. So he moved and lived there until his death in 1987.

In 1973 Henry Louis Gates Jr—now a distinguished historian, literary critic and affable host of the popular PBS' series *Finding our Roots*—but then a 22 year old journalist assigned by Time magazine to write a story on Black Expatriates. Gates visited Baldwin and brought with him the famous dancer Josephine Baker, then well into her sixties but still every inch the star. He writes of that trip that he himself was wearing "my gold-rimmed cool-blue shades and my bodacious Afro" —they must have made quite a pair. They were greeted by Baldwin and brought out to the patio where there was the table prepared for guests. That particular meal is said to be the inspiration for the play.

There is a wonderful set of pictures in the Smithsonian Museum of African American history of Baldwin and guests at that table. It looks like a scene out of an impressionist painting—and seems almost a parable of heaven.

And doesn't it sound wonderful—to create such a welcome table even in the midst of war and racism and all the conflicts and ambiguities of life as Black American and as a human in the world we still live in? As we approach the 100th anniversary of Baldwin's birth (8/2/1914) it is a good time to reread his works, still remarkably relevant after all these years.

Now at the end of Lent, as we approach Holy week and Easter, it is a good time to take stock of our own lives. How is your heart doing? Have you accepted the invitation of Love to sit and eat—to share in that abundant life of God to which we are called and invited by Christ? And can we all try to make our own homes and lives a welcome table for others, rich and poor, of all kinds and places, so that we make this earth a little more like heaven? May it be so, In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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Love (III) by George Herbert (1593 –1633)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
 Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
 "My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
 So I did sit and eat.