



100th Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

Worship Resources

Prepared by Ron Allen and Linda McKiernan-Allen

8. Proper 17 in Connection with Disciples' Reconciliation Ministry

Sunday August 29, 2010

Resources for Today

- Focus for Today
- Call to Worship
- Opening Prayer
- Significant Quote
- Responsive Reading
- Invitation to the Table
- Notes for Preaching Based on the Revised Common Lectionary
- Closing Prayer
- Possible Hymns and Songs
- The Writers

Focus for Today:

These resources are designed to call attention to the **Reconciliation Ministry in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)** and to pave the way for the Reconciliation Offering that the church will receive on September 26 and October 3, 2010 (*go to link at <http://www.reconciliationministry.org/Donate/RMSpecialOffering/tabid/729/Default.aspx>*).

The church grounds and describes the Reconciliation Ministry as follows.

Purpose: The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) celebrates the Gospel teaching that God's children come from all places and that the power of love at God's table is able to bring together all races, languages, cultures and traditions. (Revelation 5: 9-10). We recognize that there have been forces within our Church and society that have misshapen our self-understanding and promoted division. Acknowledging God's call to be faithful to the witness of unity and justice, we confess that we are sinful and that racism is a result of our sinfulness. Yet, God heals us and calls us to be reconciled one to another and all to God.

Vision: It is the vision of Reconciliation Ministry to build just communities by breaking down the walls within our church which separate us. We claim a new reality in which we live into God's realm by celebrating our unity, affirming the cultural traditions of each member of the body of Christ and working together for justice to ensure unconditional welcome and access to God's abundant resources. We envision a Church in which all communities are accountable to one another and God.

Mission: Reconciliation Ministry advances the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)'s journey toward wholeness by empowering each expression of the Church to implement structural change to address historic fractures caused by racism and the systems that perpetuate it. It is the goal of our shared work to foster life-giving community within our church and in relationship with the whole family of God. We accomplish this mission through intentional dialogue, inclusive worship and experiential education.

[From <http://www.reconciliationministry.org/Purpose/tabid/611/Default.aspx>, a website that contains many more resources for understanding the Reconciliation ministries].

In connection with African American History Month (the material on this website prepared for February 14, 2010), we cited a book that is fundamental to this philosophy and which a preacher and worship planners could profitably read in connection with the goals of the Reconciliation Ministry and the anti-racism and pro-reconciliation emphasis in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): Joseph Barndt, *Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

The theme of the Reconciliation Offering for 2010 is "**Hearts of Fire.**" Although the gospel reading for today, Luke 14:1, 7-14, does not directly deal with the motifs of hearts of fire, Luke elsewhere depicts the ministries of Jesus and the church as expressions of hearts afire for the Realm of God (e.g. Luke 3:16; Acts 2:3). Thus, Jesus's admonition to the disciples (and, through them, to the church) to practice radical hospitality at the table derives from a heart aflame for the Realm. The language of the lectionary gospel reading for today uses the practice of welcome at the table as a symbol for God's intention for Jesus's disciples and for the church: they are to practice the radical welcome embodied in Luke 14:7-14 to embody the community of the Realm of God. This theme resonates with the purpose of Reconciliation Ministry described just above.

Call to Worship

Leader: We live in a hungry world.

People: Many people are hungry: African American, Asian, Hispanic, Eurocentric.

Leader: Many people hunger for food.

People: Many people hunger for safe neighborhoods and good jobs.

Leader: Many people hunger for dignity and respect.

People: Many people hunger for power and self-determination.

Leader: Many people hunger for community and mutual support.

People: Many people hunger for reconciliation: African American, Asian, Hispanic, Eurocentric.

Leader: Many people hunger to have others recognize their place at the table of life.

People: We come to this Table because Christ says, "Welcome."

Leader: Welcome to those whose bellies are empty, whose existence outside these walls is unsafe.

People: Welcome to those who want more control over their own lives.

Leader: Welcome to those who have been alienated, harassed, and exploited.

People: This is a Table whose welcome knows no end because its host is ever present and ever alive.

Leader: Let us now turn to one another and offer words and handshakes and hugs of welcome.

Opening Prayer

O God, as Jesus welcomed to his table the poor, the lame, the lame, the blind, the tax collectors and sinners, so you welcome us today. In this time of worship, help us recognize and confess the sin of the ways that we put people into meaningless categories and eat at separate tables. Help us respond joyously to your welcoming presence so that this time of worship can become an experience of welcome for all. May all feel dignity, respect, empowerment, mutual support, and community. And help the loaf and the cup become a source of energy so that when we leave here, we can each be force-fields of welcome. Help our life as a congregation become a Welcome Table. Through Christ. Amen.

Significant Quote

Dennis Smith, a Disciples scholar of the Gospels and Letters, is the world's foremost authority on eating customs in antiquity. After noting that the ministry of Jesus in Luke focuses on eating with the poor, the blind, the lame, lepers, the deaf, crippled, the blind, and the lame, Smith comments on our passage. In doing so, he points to a connection between the text for today and the great themes of Reconciliation Ministry.

“[Jesus’s] followers are to continue that same ministry of Jesus. His servanthood, in the sense that he fills the hungry, is to be followed by the community of his disciples. Now the symbolism changes; the meal becomes symbolic not of Jesus’ ministry but that of the church as a whole, or, better, it becomes a symbol of the church itself. Notice how this idea is presented in the following parable: [Here Smith quotes Luke 14:12-14]. Lest the connection be missed, this parable is placed back to back with the parable of the great banquet, a parable that clearly refers to Jesus’ ministry and invitation to the same outcasts. Thus the church is to follow Jesus’ lead by extending its fellowship (or its meal invitation) to society’s outcasts just as Jesus did (and will do) at the end-time.”

Indeed, Smith says of Jesus’s eating with others and of the church’s eating together, “For it is fellowship of the most intimate kind that is envisioned here. The richness of the meal imagery of popular culture and literature, whereby sharing a meal meant sharing a relationship of a special kind, is here applied to a definition of the Christian community.” [Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 270-71].

Provocative Material for Preaching

Alice Walker’s short story, “The Welcome Table” is especially provocative for preaching and both explicitly deals with themes at the center of Reconciliation Ministry and implicitly deals with themes related to the reading from Luke for today. This story can be found in Walker’s *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1995, o.p. 1973), pp.81-88.

The story takes place on a Sunday in the cold of winter. An older African American woman enters a church building for a congregation of people of European origin. She is thin and haggard and wearing an old mildewed dress that does not have all its buttons. None of the Eurocentric people attempt to speak with her. Instead, they think she looks like a house servant, or a former mistress or someone who should live in a jungle. Her presence causes many of the people of European background to be afraid that African Americans will soon overrun their church—which is supposed to be a sanctuary for the Eurocentric community.

She sits on the back pew, but the Eurocentric congregation deliberately avoids her by sitting near the front of the church. The wives of European background prevail upon their husbands to throw the African American woman out of the church. They physically toss her into the cold.

As the elderly African American woman starts down the highway, she sees Jesus walking towards her. The sight of Jesus prompts her to overflow with joy and to sing and shout. She tells Jesus what has just happened, and she tells him about many other things in her life, including her struggles. Jesus listens to her and loves her. She sings and dances for him.

She is so absorbed with Jesus that she does not notice that they pass her house. While she does not know where Jesus is going, she knows it will be amazing. She is confident she will be with him forever.

Later that day, the Eurocentric congregation hears that an older African American woman who was walking along the road was struck by a car and killed. They do not connect the dead woman with the woman who had been in their church. Some African American households report that they saw the woman walking by herself along the road. They saw her singing and dancing, but assumed she was on her way to visit some relatives. This is the end of the story.

The story affirms how welcoming Jesus is. It also leaves readers to ponder the question of how welcoming we are, especially to people who are very different.

For a study guide, see <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-the-welcome-table/>.

Other Liturgical Material

If the congregation uses a screen, a focus for a visual meditation during the time the congregation is partaking of the loaf and the cup might be a montage of slides that depict people eating together with the people coming from diverse racial/ethnic communities, different ages, different socio-economic groups, different gender orientations. The slides could include large tables and small tables, tables in various locations (homes, schools, restaurants, churches) and, of course, the sacred Table. Background music might come from one of the songs below.

If the congregation is made up primarily of people from one racial/ethnic background, the congregation could worship with a congregation (or with other congregations) made up primarily of people from other racial/ethnic backgrounds, followed by a common meal at which people share dishes from their different communities. The service and the meal might include times in

which representatives from the different groups share their perceptions of one another, especially their frustrations and their hopes.

The following liturgical expression was developed for use in a college setting and has a heavy focus on denominational differences along with other differences. A worship leader could use it as a model for developing a liturgical expression that uses people, groups, and issues that are present in the context of the congregation. The expression is made with four voices numbered 1, 2, 3, 4. The voices speak both singly and in various combinations, thus heightening the sense of diversity.

- 1: I am a United Methodist.
- 2: I am a Presbyterian.
- 3: I am a Lutheran.
- 4: I am a Southern Baptist. Is there a space for me here?
- 1-3: Is there a space for me here?

- 1: I am an Episcopalian
- 2: I am a Roman Catholic.
- 3: I used to be Catholic, and now I'm Episcopalian!
- 4: I used to be Episcopalian, and now I can't stand the Church.
- 1: I can't stand Christians.
- 2: I don't think Jesus really came back to life.
- 3: I'm not sure that God is real. Is there a space for me here?
- 1,2, & 4: Is there a space for me here?

- 4: I sin all the time.
- 1: I'm sinning right now!
- 2: If my mom found out I came here she'd kill me!
- 3: My friends would disown me if they knew I came to church.
- 4: I am Pentecostal; it's so quiet in here!
- 1: I meditated once; I thought it was cool.
- 2: I am Quaker; it's way too loud in here!
- 3: My parents go to a Unitarian Universalist church, but I think it's boring so I sleep in on Sundays.
- 4: My parents don't know that I sneak off to a Metropolitan Community Church, where I'm loved for who I am.
- 1-4: Is there a space for me here?

- 3: I don't know what to believe.
- 4: Who tells the truth?
- 1: If she's right, does that make me wrong?
- 2: Even if we are
- 3-4: Different?
- 1: Is there a space for us here?
- 2: Is there?
- 1-4: Is there a space for us here?

(From: http://delynsu.blogspot.com/2008_08_01_archive.html).

Invitation to the Table

In many households and commercial settings today, eating is mainly a utilitarian activity, a way to get enough energy into your body to get onto your next task. You grab a banana on your way out the door in the morning and eat it in the car or at your desk. You pop into a fast food restaurant for a high-calorie but low-nutrition lunch. For supper, members of the household scoop something out of the refrigerator as they pass through the kitchen on their way to and from practices, games, meetings, and movies.

By contrast, in antiquity, food was often scarce and they did not take the presence of food for granted. To share your limited amount of food with another person was to affirm them. To eat together was an act of mutual respect. They sealed covenants by eating a meal. Indeed, eating together was a sign of reconciliation among enemies.

We eat together now at the Table of Christ. By doing so we not only accept God's love for us, but we also recognize and honor God's love for all. More than that, by taking the loaf and the cup and we affirm others, especially those who are different. We say, "I intend to respect others." Indeed, we enter into covenant with them to work with them and with Christ for the day when life is a great banquet for all.

Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for August 28, 2010)

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Eating together has been and continues to be important in many cultures, but especially so in the world in which Luke wrote in antiquity. Sitting at table with others was more than eating food and socializing. In that setting to eat together was not only to accept the others with whom one ate but to commit oneself to their well being. Indeed, the hostess or host gave to the guest food that would otherwise have supported the hostess's own household. Banquets were the occasions of important public conversations

The social world of the Roman Empire was highly stratified and repressive. People had specific places in the social hierarchy. Those in the higher reaches enjoyed power and respect while those in the lower depths were obliged to be obedient and to show respect to those above. The seating at banquets took place according to that hierarchy, with the places near the host reserved for those in the upper echelons (at least according to social ordering in the Empire). The farther one's seat was from the host, the lower one's place in the social fabric. The seating at the banquet thus represented and reinforced the social world.

These things are especially true of wedding banquets. Weddings were major functions in Mediterranean antiquity, often lasting several days.

For Luke the hierarchical and abusive Roman social structure is the epitome of the old age that God seeks to replace with the community of the Realm.

The Realm of God is in the background of every text in Luke-Acts (as we noted more fully in connection with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 24, 2010). For Luke, the Realm is the new social world that God is bringing through Jesus Christ when all relationships will take place in a community of love, peace, justice, joy, acceptance, respect, abundance and, ultimately, eternal life. Reconciliation of the kind described by the Reconciliation Ministry (see the Focus for Today above) is an aspect of the community of the Realm.

For Luke the ministry of Jesus before the resurrection and ascension embodied aspects of that Realm in a limited way. After the ascension, the church was to witness to the Realm and invite people to experience it and await its final coming. At the second coming, God would bring the Realm in its fullness. In the present, individual relationships and

Many Jewish people thought that after the Realm was fully established, God would put on a huge banquet to celebrate it. Scholars often refer to this meal as the eschatological banquet or the messianic banquet. We often use the language of “end-time banquet” for this meal as the latter expression is more accessible to lay people. This banquet celebrated continuous and unending reconciliation among all peoples.

For Luke (and many other writers of the Gospels and Letters), the meals that Jesus had with tax collectors, sinners, and others anticipated the great end-time banquet. The last supper was such a meal. Many of the church’s meals in Acts fall into the same category. The end-time banquet celebrated continuous and unending reconciliation among all peoples.

Luke intends for all meal functions in the church to take their cues from today’s text. Every time the church eats together, the act of eating together realizes the Realm in a limited way. For Luke, this is especially true of the Breaking of the Bread. Indeed, today’s passage helps the church understand the Sacred Meal as a realization of the Realm. More than those things, Luke 14:7-14 uses a dinner as a paradigm not only for eating together but also for life in the community anticipating the Realm.

As the text begins, Jesus has been invited to a dinner at the house of an unnamed Pharisee (Luke 14:1). The fact of the dinner cues the reader to think of this meal as a type of the end-time banquet as proleptically experienced in the common meals of the church.

When Jesus arrives at the dinner, he sees people behaving in old-age patterns around the table (Luke 14:7). The guests crave seats of honor close to the host. From Luke’s point of view, this shows how ensconced they are in the old age and its values. They mistakenly assume that the banquet of the Realm is organized after the pattern of the hierarchical and abusive society of the Roman period.

According to Luke, Jesus then tells a parable (Luke 14:8ff.) This occurrence of the word “parable” reminds today’s preacher—who may romanticize the parables—that the notion of

parable embraced a wide range of forms and functions in antiquity. The parable here is not a haunting narrative with a surprising plot and conclusion, but is straightforward Realm wisdom.

According to the Lukan Jesus, people living towards the Realm should not seek places of honor according to the paradigm of the old world. Indeed, if you seat yourself at a high place at the table (seeking the accolades, respect, and power that come with such a seat), you may find that the host asks you to move farther down in order to accommodate someone who more naturally fits in the seat you had taken .

The social world of antiquity was an honor/shame society. To be expelled from a place of high honor to a place of lower honor was a shameful situation. Luke even uses the word “disgrace” to describe this occurrence (Luke 14:9).

When you arrive at the banquet hall, you should seek the lowest seat. If you are a faithful member of the wedding party (Luke implies), the host can then move you up the seating chart to a place of honor that cannot be taken from you (Luke 14:10).

The point is revealed in Luke 14:11. This is not simply a life-principle but is specifically focused on the Realm. With respect to the Realm of God, those who exalt themselves will be humbled. That is, people will be condemned who think the Realm is simply the Roman social world writ large and who try to use the Realm for their own personal power and gain. Those who humble themselves, that is, those who relinquish their investment in the old age but instead serve the purposes of the Realm will be exalted, that is, welcomed into the Realm.

To this point in the text, Luke appears to adapt conventional Roman banquet customs to the life of the Realm. Roman society has its hierarchy (which is destructive in its effects). The Realm of God has a comparable hierarchy (with Realm effects). The preacher might naively characterize Luke’s banquet etiquette as a simple reversal. However, that is a painful oversimplification. To be sure, Luke assumes that the Realm will have an organizing social structure. But Luke 14:12-14 implies that the social world of the Realm includes those who are ordinarily excluded from a formal banquet occasion. The latter groups are presented here by the poor, crippled, lame, and blind.

Luke 14:12-14 uses the invitation to a dinner as a figure for participating in the Realm. Luke 14:12 reminds readers that the community in the Realm is not simply a matter of reciprocity as if participate with your friends, relatives, and rich neighbors in the community of the Realm, and they participate with you (Luke 14:12).

Scholars and preachers rightly note that Luke has compassion for those in the lower strata of the social world in the old age, such as the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. In the Realm, they will experience abundance of life denied to them in present existence. The point of the present text is that the church as proleptic community of the Realm should be in material solidarity with the poor, crippled, lame and blind in the present in a way that anticipates the unending abundance of the Realm in the future. Indeed, the life of the church is one of God’s means of providing for the disadvantaged in the present.

Reciprocity was a more of the social world in antiquity (as it is in many quarters today). If you have me for a nice meal, then I should have you. The poor, crippled, lame and blind could not provide such reciprocity. However, according to Luke 14:14, God relieves them of the burden (and shame) of not being able to repay, and God relieves the host of the frustration (and feeling of disrespected) of not being invited in return. Reciprocity comes at the resurrection of the righteousness, i.e. at the coming of the Realm of God. The reader, of course, knows this is not simple reciprocity for God will gather *all the faithful* (including the poor, crippled, lame, and blind as well as the wealthy and all in between) into the Realm. Reciprocity as a category disappears. The host is longer being paid back but is included in the community of the Realm. That is far better than mere reciprocity.

From the standpoint of Reconciliation Ministry, the church (as prototype of the Realm) is incomplete if it is made up only of people from the same socio-economic groups. Reconciliation means coming together as community in the manner of Luke 14:12-14. Reconciliation is not complete as long as people continue to exist in stratified and segregated socio/economic and racial/ethnic communities.

Disciples, perhaps more than any other Christian body, cannot hear these themes without thinking of the community that gathers at the Sacred Table. To what degree is community around the Table on Sunday morning a prolepsis of the Realm that includes today's poor, crippled, lame, and blind as well as those who are host and hostess (by today's standards)? How can the sermon help the congregation more fully a reconciling body?

Closing Words

We came to the Table earlier today separated, suspicious, and angry. At both the figurative table of community and the literal Table of communion, God welcomed us, accepted us, brought us together, and fed us. Now God gives us a mission: to set reconciling Tables wherever we are—at home, at school, in the workplace, on vacation. And remember: when we welcome others, we welcome Christ who is present through them.

Possible Hymns and Songs

(Numbers in parenthesis are from the Chalice Hymnal)

“When You Do This, Remember Me” (400)

“In Remembrance of Me” (403)

“I;m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table” (424)

“God Made All People of the World” (685)

“These I Lay Down” (391)

The Writers

Linda is Transitional Minister of West Street Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tipton, Indiana. She writes regularly for the *Journal of Worship Resources* and has edited several volumes of worship resources, including *Celebrating Justice and Liberation* (Chalice Press).

Ron teaches preaching and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. One of his books—recently published—is designed to help Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, and individuals explore the range of what Christians believe about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and God’s purposes in the world: *A Faith of Your Own: Naming What You Really Believe*. In addition to being short and inexpensive, this volume includes questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.