**Being Church…**

Jeremiah 2:4-13 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 **Luke14:1, 7-14**

**Scott B. Martin – September 2, 2007**

Pope Benedict, for the second time in his career, recently caused a bit of a stir with his contention that Protestant churches were not really full fledged churches. He did allow that God's grace could work in them, defective though they might be. Perhaps not surprisingly, he said that only Catholic Churches had all the marks of true churches. This raises a very good question, "What is a church?"

Pope Benedict makes much of the idea of Apostolic Succession and the way it helps ensure the validity of the sacraments. Apostolic succession traces its roots to the New Testament passage where Jesus tells Peter that on **"this rock I will build my church."** (Matthew 16:18) Now Catholics claim that the "rock" was Peter himself, pointing to place where Peter is told **"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: the things you don't allow on earth will be the things that God does not allow, and the things you allow on earth will be the things that God allows."** (Matthew 16:19)

The Catholic Church also claims Peter became the first bishop of Rome and that as a result the Roman Catholic Church is the rightful successor to this via Apostolic Succession. The pope and the church he leads, is seen as being the not only the historical successor but also the wielder of the "keys of heaven." This power is passed on down the system and from generation to generation by the "laying on of hands," the invoking of the Holy Spirit, during ordinations and installations of priest, bishops, archbishops, and even pope.

It is my understanding that this power expresses itself in many ways, including the power to consecrate the bread and cup so that they are transfigured into what Catholics believe to be the literal "body and blood" of Christ. The Catholic Church believes that no other body can claim an unbroken apostolic line back to Peter and thus their sacraments are "incomplete," if not totally defective.

Now I hope I have been fair in this all too brief exploration of apostolic succession. There is much I admire about the Catholic Church. My own father was a good practicing Catholic. I do, however, have some major problems with their ideas about the nature of the church.

First, there is no biblical evidence that Peter was ever bishop of Rome. They didn't even have bishops in the beginning! There isn't even any biblical evidence that Peter was even head of the church in Rome or that he ever lived there. Nothing in the Bible even tells us where he died. Church tradition says he was the first bishop of Rome and was martyred there.

For that matter there is no biblical evidence Peter ever was even head of the church in Jerusalem. In fact the Bible tells us that James, the brother of Jesus was the first head of the church. Peter was an important leader in these early days, to be sure, but he is not the head of the church. Indeed, James and other early church leaders send a letter to Peter admonishing him not to eat with gentiles as he had decided to do. He and Paul have big break up over this. Clearly Peter was not the head of the early church and did not have the authority spoken of in Matthew chapter 16.

The church in Rome came to preeminence for three major reasons. First of all, it was the capital of the Roman Empire, with all the cultural advantages that implies. Second, when the Western Roman Empire collapsed it left a power vacuum that the church there filled. Third, the

Mideast and Asia Minor came under the sway of the Muslims in the 8th century and Christianity there lost much of its power and influence in terms of the western world.

I must admit that I find the ecclesiastical claims of the Catholic Church to be self-centered and arrogant. For that matter, any church that claims to be the only path to heaven or somehow claims to have a direct line to God I find to be unbiblical. There are Protestant churches that make such claims. The idea that any human being, not matter what office they hold, could claim to have the keys to heaven, I find abhorrent. I personally can not believe that any human being can have the kind of power that is given to the interpretation of Matthew 19, that whatever they decide God will sanction. This would make the human God and God, less than God!

Indeed, even Matthew 16 makes it clear that the Christian church will be built on the confession of Christ to be Lord and Savior. When Jesus asks his disciples who he was Peter says, **"You are the Christ, the son of the Living God!"** (Matthew 16:16) Jesus then tells Peter, **"You are blessed … because no person taught you that. My Father in heaven showed you who I am."** (Matthew 16:17) It is then that Peter is told he is the rock on which the church will be built.

Essentially this confession marks the nascent Christian Church. Peter is the first person in Matthews Gospel to make this confession. This confession will be the mark of the Christian Church from then on to the present day. The Christian Church is made up of people who claim Christ is Lord and seek to follow him. In this following the Christian community of faith grows in faith, hope and love. In this following we seek to edify one another in the ways of the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle Paul pointed out. In this following we seek God's forgiveness and new life for ourselves and

offer it to others. In this following we seek to love God and neighbor as ourselves. In this following we seek to be of service to God and others. In this following we seek to reach out to the stranger, the sojourner, the poor, the oppressed, and the despised. In this following we recognize our failures and shortcomings and seek to walk in humbleness.

Now with all this in mind, let's take a look at today's Gospel passage from Luke. Jesus is at another Sabbath meal in someone's house, the home of a "leading" Pharisee to be precise. Once again Jesus has broken the religious laws by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus asks his hosts if it is legal to heal on the Sabbath. For whatever reason, they do not reply.

Now, if you were here last Sunday, when we looked at Sabbath observance, you will recall that for Jews one of the three main reasons for celebrating the Sabbath meal is to experience a foretaste of the divine kingdom to come. As Richard Swanson points out, **"Meals in the Jewish community, then and now, are not just occasions to consume massive quantities of nourishing material. Meals are eaten as if the table were the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. This gathering is freighted with ritual significance, especially once the Temple had been destroyed. When the Pharisee invites Jesus to dine, he is not simply carrying out his responsibility to extend hospitality to a wanderer …; he is honoring Jesus as a Jew, a member of the host of Israel."** (Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Luke, p. 185)*

In God's Kingdom who gets to come to the table? Who gets to be part of the family of God? Who gets to enjoy the fruits, the sustenance God provides? Who gets to experience the renewing presence of God? These are ancient questions that are still with us today.

In our passage today Jesus notices a lot of jockeying for position at the Sabbath table. Everybody wants to sit at the head table, or as close to it as they dare to sit! Jesus is amused and perhaps a bit saddened to see all this jockeying for position. Never one to miss a good teaching moment Jesus says, "**When someone invites you to a wedding feast, don't take the most important seat, because someone more important than you may have been invited. The host, who invited both of you, will come to you and say, 'Give this person your seat.' Then you will be embarrassed and will have to move to the last place. So when you are invited, go sit in a seat that is not important. When the host comes to you, he may say, 'Friend, move up here to a more important place.' Then all the other guests will respect you."** (Luke 14:7-10)

Jesus is not playing Miss Manners here. Jesus is using this moment to teach something about the Kingdom of God, which quite often in the Bible is described as being like a wedding feast.

Secondly, notice that Jesus does not guarantee that the host will ask you to move to a more "important place." Just being at the wedding feast should be honor enough for anyone.

Third, notice that everyone is invited, both the important and the not so important, we might well extrapolate and say even the totally "unimportant," by worldly standards. Jesus makes this clear in the parable of the Great Banquet which follows today's passage, in which the poor, the lame and the outcast are invited.

Finally, notice that it is the host who determines who is invited and where they end up sitting. It is pretty clear that the host is God. God is in charge and determines who sits at the table and where, not the guests. When it comes to God's table, God is the host and we are the guests!

When Jesus looked around at the religious people of his day he saw people putting themselves forward, trying to say they were worthy, they kept the holy laws, they maintained ritual purity and therefore they were deserving. In doing so they are clearly not only putting themselves forward they are saying many others are not worthy. Jesus makes it clear that God will turn their imagined world upside down, saying, **"All who make themselves great will be made humble, but those who make themselves humble will be exalted."** (Luke 14:11)

I offer this final observation on what the church is and who is in it. It comes from Frederick Buechner. "The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to look. The invisible church is all the people God uses for his hands and feet in this world. Nobody can find out who they are except God. Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap." *(Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, p. 15)*

May we be in the circle, the community that humbly seeks to be God's hands and feet in the world. Amen.