

September 1, 2019
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 17
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus is at "the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath." Because the Gospels depict Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees, Jesus might seem like an odd dinner guest. One might wonder why the Pharisee invited Jesus and why Jesus accepted. I think the answer is this: it's not just a social occasion. As a leader of the Pharisees, the host is an important person in the community. His Sabbath meals would have involved business as well as pleasure, for him and for his guests. Through invitation and acceptance, the Pharisee and Jesus each accomplish his own agenda.

For a clue as to the nature of that agenda, note that Luke describes the Pharisees as closely watching Jesus. Read between the lines a little farther on, and you realize that Jesus is closely watching everyone else. All parties are watchful, though for different reasons. I imagine the Pharisees to be curious about and suspicious of Jesus. I imagine Jesus to be making the most of yet another learning lab of human behavior. Luke specifically tells us that Jesus notices the guests maneuvering for seating position; based on what follows, we can assume that Jesus also notices the guest list.

Unintimidated by his surroundings, and perhaps rudely under the circumstances, Jesus speaks up. The delivery is softened with an indication that he's going to tell a parable, but he doesn't actually tell one. Instead, Jesus is much more direct in criticizing the practices of guests and then of hosts. In essence, Jesus says what he says throughout the Gospel of Luke: that the human world order is not God's; what humans consider important, isn't, and what humans consider unimportant, is; status should be and will be redistributed, from top to bottom and bottom to top.

This "overturning" is a theme of Luke's gospel, a thread running through it from beginning to end. It is expressed most powerfully in the first chapter of Luke, in the words of the Magnificat. Luke has been our primary Gospel source since the first Sunday of Advent last year, and we heard the Magnificat soon thereafter. Also known as the Song of Mary, The Magnificat is the pregnant Mary's prophetic reply to her even more pregnant cousin Elizabeth. One of the hymns suggested as an appropriate companion for today's Gospel is "Tell out my soul." It's a paraphrase of the Magnificat, and we'll sing it for the offertory.

Let's get back to Luke's "overturning." In the Magnificat, Mary describes what *God* has done—in short, casting down the powerful and lifting up the lowly. In today's story, Jesus is concerned about what *people* are doing: "don't do *this*," he says; "Instead, do *this*." In case there was any doubt, Jesus makes it clear: God expects humans to *participate* in this project of overturning. Possessed of free will, humans are less God's *pawns* and more God's *agents*.

Jesus lived as a Jew in first-century Palestine; he occupied a culture very different from ours. Still, this dinner-party scenario is as plausible today as it ever was. If at any time the Gospels describe a situation that resembles *our* real lives, it's this one. We've all seen this sort of behavior in action: at work; in our families; in our churches. We've seen it from guests; we've seen it from hosts. We've probably even participated in this sort of behavior, as guests and as hosts.

Jesus says: "Don't do *this*; instead, do *this*." In this as in so many things, that is much easier said than done. Apparently, at least since Jesus' time, humans have wanted to associate with and impress the "right people." Over and over, in ways simple and complex, people get parsed into boxes, and then ranked within those boxes. The implications extend far beyond any dinner party.

Last month marked the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first slaves to the land that would eventually become the United States of America. Two Sundays ago, this was the subject of a special feature in *The New York Times*. I encourage you to read it if you haven't. I consider myself pretty well informed about slavery and its ongoing consequences in America, and yet there is always more to learn. Among the things I learned in *The Times* were some awful extra details about the production of sugar in my home state of Louisiana.

One really big surprise came from a photograph, printed full-*Magazine*-page-size. I saw the photo before I read the headline. Glancing at it, all I saw was a highway. Odd, I thought. And then I read the heading above the photo: "A traffic jam in Atlanta would seem to have nothing to do with slavery. But look closer. ..." ¹ I looked closer, and realization set in. To put it simply, on one side of the highway is wealth, and on the other, poverty. That photograph was captured what words can't, but I'll still include some words from the accompanying article. Explaining that "Atlanta has some of the worst traffic in the United States," the author observes that, "For much of the nation's history, the campaign to keep African-Americans 'in their place' socially and politically manifested itself in an effort to keep them quite literally in one place or another." ² He goes on to recount how this form of racism extended to the interstate highway system.

As in most American cities in the decades after the Second World War, the new highways in Atlanta—local expressways at first, then Interstates—were steered along routes that bulldozed "blighted" neighborhoods that housed its poorest residents, almost always racial minorities. This was a common practice not just in Southern cities like Jacksonville, Miami, Nashville, New Orleans, Richmond and Tampa, but in countless metropolises across the country, including Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Syracuse and Washington.

While Interstates were regularly used to destroy black neighborhoods, they were also used to keep black and white neighborhoods apart. Today, major roads and highways serve as stark dividing lines between black and white sections in cities like Buffalo, Hartford, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and St. Louis. In Atlanta, the intent to segregate was crystal clear. Interstate 20, the east-west corridor that connects with I-75 and I-85 in Atlanta's center, was deliberately plotted along a winding route in the late 1950s to serve, in the words of Mayor Bill Hartsfield, as "the boundary between the white and Negro communities" on the west side of town. Black neighborhoods, he hoped, would be hemmed in on one side of the new expressway, while white neighborhoods on the other side of it would be protected. Racial residential patterns have long since changed, of course, but the awkward path of I-20 remains in place.³

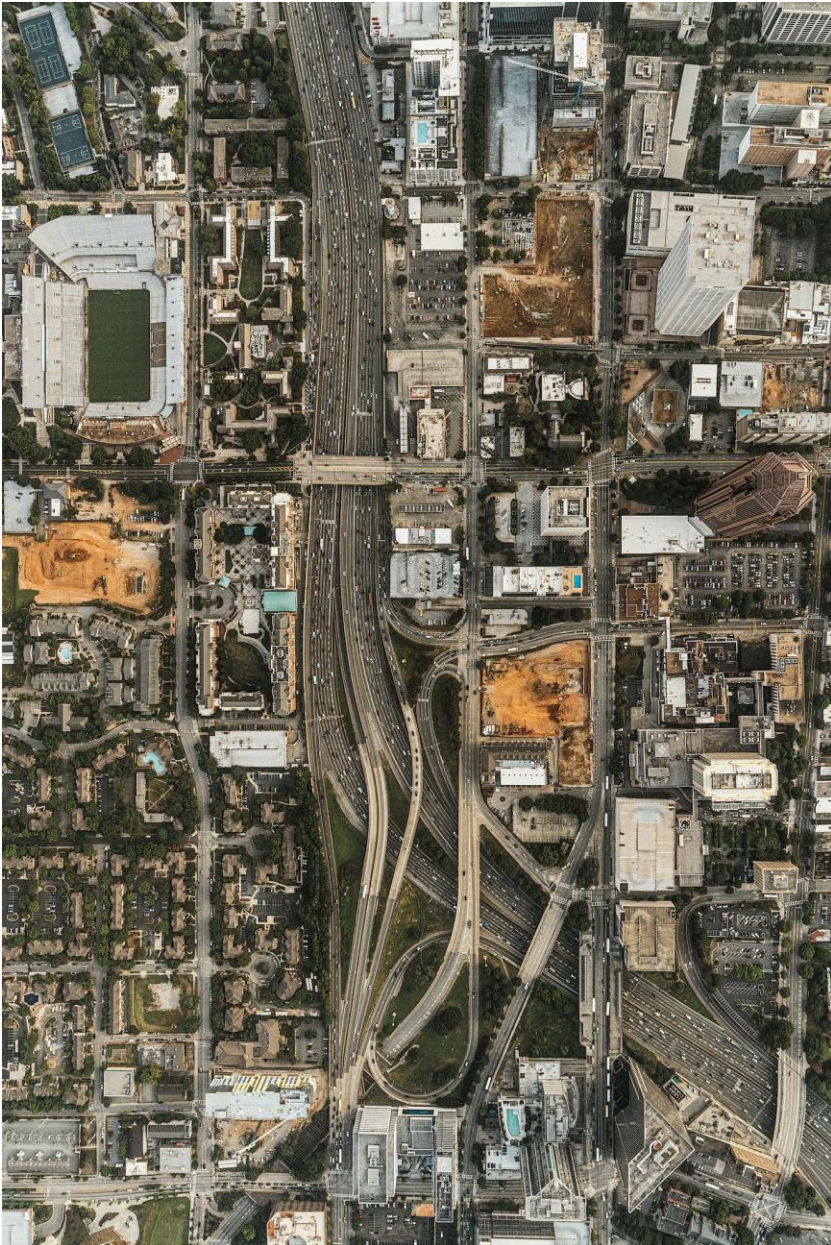
As Christians, we might understand that photograph as a bloated version of Jesus' dinner party. Evil on a massive scale is the accumulation of innumerable otherwise relatively insignificant individual human acts. Maybe, just maybe, breaking the granite monolith of sin down into its constituent atoms helps individuals to acknowledge both their own culpability as contributors, and their own agency as healers.

I'm not saying it's easy. Humans are tempted by the same weaknesses and subject to the same failings as they were in the time of Jesus. As I said earlier about the behavior Jesus observes, we've all seen it, and we've probably even participated in it. It seems to me that it is so often the result of human insecurity rooted in human vulnerability. Applying current language, we might call it "seeking external validation." The solution of course is not *external validation*, but rather *internal love*. As we cultivate the awareness of God's outpouring of love within us, we are released from fear and strengthened with confidence.

God is throwing a dinner party, and you're invited, honored guest among honored guests. It's not like any human dinner party, and thank goodness for that. There are no rankings and no separations. There is only unfolding love. Come and see what the world can become. Leave and be an agent of God's reconciling—and overturning—grace.

Notes

¹ Kevin M. Kruse, “A traffic jam in Atlanta would seem to have nothing to do with slavery. But look closer. . . .,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, 48. This article is available online with the title, “What does a traffic jam in Atlanta have to do with segregation? Quite a lot.,” available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/traffic-atlanta-segregation.html?searchResultPosition=3> (accessed August 29, 2019). Here is the referenced photograph:



² *Ibid.*, 49.

³ *Ibid.*