Pastor Lillian Daniel shares a conversation she had with a man who has joined the Church’s Alumni Association. I’ve had variations of the same conversation with church dropouts who attempt to justify and explain why they no longer attend. There may not be a living, breathing minister in the entire country who has not had this conversation.

The man told Lillian that he had formerly belonged to the church, but he no longer participated in organized religion. Now he spends his Sunday mornings reading *The New York Times* or taking a run through the woods. He finds God in nature and he assures her that he’s deeply spiritual, but not religious.

He dropped this line on her as if he had made a breakthrough discovery which prompted him to take a bold stand that would surely jolt this naïve minister who had never heard such defiance. But, as Lillian points out, this “well-meaning Sunday jogger fits right into mainstream American culture…people who have stepped away from the church in favor of running, newspaper reading, Sunday yoga, or whatever they put together to construct a more convenient religion of their own making.”

She’s heard the story so many times that she was tempted to interrupt and tell the story for him. “Let me guess, you read *The New York Times* from cover to cover every Sunday and you get more out of it than the sermon. Let me guess, you find God in nature. You see God in the woods on a long run or when walking on the beach. And don’t forget the sunset. As if people who attend church would not know that.”

We’re all so dim-witted that we never heard the story of creation or the psalms that praise God for the amazing earth and sea and stars. Well, surprise! We see God’s hand in nature, too.

But what else is there to your religion?

Generally, if you try to push these folks a little further, you won’t get much in terms of depth. You might get some sentimental ideas that you could glean from most seven year-olds, but not much that would line up with the challenging teachings of Jesus.

To be fair, not everyone who has exited the church left because they have turned inward and created their own religion that fits their schedule better and the lifestyle they pursue. Some have fled the church because their experience was so unsettling. Their church was anti-women, anti-science, anti-gay and anti-all religious faiths other than their own. At some level they realized that the teachings of their church did not square with the God
that Jesus revealed. They recognized that God’s love was a great deal more generous and welcoming than their
church was promoting. At some point they decided they did not want to be connected with a community of faith
whose tight boundary lines fenced out the kind of people with whom Jesus often ate dinner and shared a glass of
wine.

Author, researcher and church consultant, Diana Butler-Bass, has a pithy piece of advice for churches that have
become so narrow and self-righteous that God’s loving Spirit has little room to operate. All churches would do
well to heed her provocative statement. She says “Hospitality is salvation.” When I first heard that, I was a bit
skeptical. She unpacks that phrase by saying that human beings wander away from God and spend too much
time focused on the wrong things. We create distance between ourselves and God, we create distance between
ourselves and others and we create a distance between who we are and who God intends for us to be. However,
Butler says, “Salvation is God setting a new table and welcoming all back to the table.”

God’s radical love for us – God’s lavish hospitality – is salvation. That may sound foreign to us because the
church has generally confined the definition of salvation to “going to heaven after we die.” However,
throughout the Scriptures, salvation encompasses much more. It often points to profound changes that occur in
people now, not later.

The gospels tell us that Jesus saves people from their sins by forgiving them. He forgives them, not so that when
they finally die they will join God in paradise, but so that they will immediately embark on a new course that
will transform their life. It is a path that seeks to treat others the way we want to be treated: with love, patience,
respect and such empathy that when our life crumbles, others will show up to help us pick up the pieces.

The word salvation comes from “salve” which is a healing ointment. The healing ministry of Jesus saves people
from spending the remainder of their earthly lives in pain and misery. Salvation entails Christ bringing health
and wholeness and wellbeing to our souls.

Last year on my sabbatical, Camilla and I visited Jericho, the oldest and lowest city on earth, where we saw a
huge and ancient sycamore tree in the middle of the old city. It stands as a reminder of the day that Zacchaeus, a
tax collector who was defrauding people, came face-to-face with Jesus. That encounter remade Zacchaeus. He
pledged to give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back four times the amount he had defrauded
anyone. Upon witnessing that transformation, Jesus said, “Today, salvation has come to this house because he
too is a son of Abraham.” Zacchaeus’ life was turned in the right direction. He embraced the rich, whole life
that comes with caring about his neighbor, and that restored him to God’s community. Salvation is knowing we
have a place at God’s table.

In today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus provides a glimpse of God’s table. However, he does not
begin with a divine vision; he begins with the dinner party to which he has been invited. Jesus has received an
invitation to dine at the home of a prominent man who has also invited a number of local notables. Why this
itinerant preacher from the small village of Nazareth made the guest list is unclear. He was not usually rubbing
shoulders with the town’s elite. Perhaps he was invited to this exclusive gathering because he was all the buzz
and the powerbrokers in the community thought they should check him out. However, in the end, Jesus is the
one who does the evaluating.

As the guests gather, Jesus takes note of how the men jockey for position. In the ancient world, where you sat
mattered. At issue was not making sure that left-handers were on a corner where they would not be jabbing their
right-handed neighbors. Neither was there any thought given to sitting next to your closest friends. Your seat
was determined by your perceived status. Those near the top of the social hierarchy sat closest to the host, while
those with lesser credentials were back in the cheap seats.
Imagine that the communion table is where the host sits. Those of you who are closest, the choir, transepts, first pews are the hot shots. People look up to you and envy your status. As the host, I’m proud to have you at his party because some of you raise my currency a little. Those in the middle pews are well known. Some of you are up and comers and may move up at the next dinner party. Those of you in the back pews, you’re not among the elite, but at least you were invited. Oh, balcony, you’re not quite up to this party. You’re on the outside, looking in. Sorry!

You can see how awkward situations could easily arise. Someone might assess those invited and consider himself in the top echelon and take a place near the host. Then, a couple of more prestigious guests might enter and he would have to rise from his place and move a couple of pegs down the ladder.

Jesus knows a teachable moment when he sees one, so he says, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited; and the host comes to you and says, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you slink to a lower place. But when you are invited, sit down at the lowest place, so that your host may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of the others. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’”

It is a sound proverb on humility, and I suspect those gathered thought that it was a clever strategy to tuck away for future use. But as was often the case, Jesus had a bit more to say; something to blast them out of their cultural conventions and to see the world not as they usually perceived things to be, but through the eyes of God.

Jesus said, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

It is a strong reminder that there is a special place in the divine heart for the poor and those often relegated to the periphery of society. It is a strong reminder that we ought not focus only on those who can repay our invitations, but on all those who are precious in God’s eyes. And it is a strong reminder that people considered unimportant in the eyes of the world will have some of the finest seats at God’s table.

A few years ago, just after Labor Day, Charles Campbell, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, was standing on a platform in Atlanta waiting for a subway train. A homeless man he had met walked over to stand with him. He said, “Remember me? I’m Michael – just like the angel!”

As they chatted, Michael told him about his ongoing search for a job and expressed his gratitude to God for the many ways God was taking care of him. When the train arrived, they boarded, sat down together and continued their conversation. At one point Charles asked Michael where he had eaten on Labor Day – a difficult day for homeless people in Atlanta because a number of places close. Michael said he had eaten at the Open Door Community, a Christian community that serves about 400 people a day. Michael’s eyes grew wide as he described the huge helping of “real pinto beans” and the generous portions of corn bread “this thick” (holding his thumb and forefinger two inches apart).

Charles said, “That sounds great. How many people were at the meal?”

Michael stared at him for a few moments, then announced in a loud voice for everyone on the train to hear: “Thousands! There were thousands! They came from north and south and east and west. There were thousands!”

3 of 4
Despite being stripped of place and dignity by homelessness, Michael had caught a glimpse of the great messianic banquet where all will gather at the table of our Lord and all will eat as much as they want from the abundance.

I hope everyone here knows deep in your soul that you are welcome at God’s table and you are welcome in this community of faith. If you are young, middle-aged or old, light-skinned or dark-skinned, rich or poor, and whatever your sexual orientation or political beliefs or your marital status, you are a beloved child of God and welcome in this church family. And I pray that you will reflect God’s gracious and generous welcome so that all may know they have a very special place at the table.

NOTES

2. Ibid.

Prayers of the People ~ Rev. Thomas R. Stout

Gracious Creator, we thank you that you give us each other.
For we discover in the friction and comfort of our life together, just what it means to be your body and to be whole.

In your mercy, help us to set our fear aside, to loosen our grip on what we know, and to listen for you to teach us what we need most to hear.

We pray for this community, and for this church. You shaped us for service; show us the good we may do – for when you use us, we come alive.

We pray for those we have labeled useless; for those whose youth and strength has gone; for those whose convictions seem strange to us; and for those who cannot find a place in the economies we trust.

Lord, we admit that we do not know always know how to pray, and yet we ask this day for peace in broken lands; for justice when the weak have no advocate; for life in the midst of despair. Move in stubborn hearts and settled minds, and give us courage beyond our imagining so we might follow where you lead.

We make these prayers in the name of Jesus, whose words still burn in our hearts, and whose breathe still unsettles your people.

Amen.

(adapted from Feasting on the Word, Worship Companion: Year C, Volume 2, “Prayers of Intercession”, page 155.)