

Being With Abraham's Bosom [Scott Kinder-Pyle]

Luke 16:19—31

WITH is a perfectly good English word; and as it occurs in this morning's gospel reading at least twice I'd like to take it seriously by reviewing some of the other places in the Bible, where this preposition is deployed:

- The prophet Isaiah invokes "**Immanuel**"—meaning, "**God Is WITH Us.**"
- Seven hundred years later, when Jesus is baptized, there's a voice heard overhead: "This is my Son, "**WITH whom I am well pleased.**"
- Then, in the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus is driven into the wilderness and tempted by Satan, he was "**WITH the wild beasts.**"
- In addition there are countless references to Jesus eating and drinking **WITH** (you name it) "prostitutes", "tax collectors" and "sinners."
- On the road to Emmaus, after the crucifixion and resurrection, a unrecognizable Christ meets two forlorn disciples and Luke 24:15 says, he "**came near and went WITH them.**"
- And Matthew's gospel culminates with the risen Jesus, standing atop a mountain and saying "**I am WITH you always—even to the end of the age...**"

WITH, it turns out, is fairly ubiquitous. But it's also nuanced. There are degrees of *WITH*ness that we should explore and not take for granted. One of the brief episodes of my young life that still haunts me is the time the mother of this teenage girl, Kay Lorrainian, asked my mother if I might escort her daughter to *her* senior prom. That is, she wanted me to go *WITH* her. And, being the nice guy (and the recent graduate of that same high school), I did my duty. But then, when I got off the dance floor, a high school teacher, who was chaperoning the affair, pressed me on the nature of our relationship—of our being with one another. He said, "I didn't know you were *WITH* Kay." And I said, "Well, I'm here with her... but I'm not really *WITH* her. You know?" And, as soon as I said it out loud, I knew something was at stake.

You see, what's at stake in our lives and even in our deaths, is REPUTATION. Who I declare myself to *BE WITH* cannot help but affect and inform how I am known—not to mention, how I know others. And we do these declarations all the time, physically, verbally, emotionally, economically... A few months ago, a judge spoke before a bunch of people who were graduating from an apprenticeship program in construction. And I was there when he told them to watch their “associations”—to watch *WITH* whom they associate. And then pointing to me as pastor, he recommended they come to church. And yet, I wonder: who is the church *WITH*? And are we truly *WITH* who we say we’re with? And what, as a result, is *our* reputation? Now, as far as the God of Israel is concerned, you and I might assume that God’s reputation is intact—primarily because, if God is truly *WITH* anybody anywhere, he’s *WITH* the righteous. And we might assume that God is in the business of *rewarding* those *WITH* whom he associates *WITH* blessings—and the popular assumption is that these blessings include material possessions, good health, security and prosperity. Are you *WITH* me? Well, even if you’re not, even if I’ve lost you, pay attention to this:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man dies and was carried away by the angels to be *WITH* Abraham. The rich man died and was buried.”

Now, the first thing I want to point out in this parable is what’s *NOT* included in most English translations; and what’s missing (from the original Greek) is the ‘***Bosom of Abraham.***’ That is, every time you read or hear the word *WITH* in that passage, what you’re meant to experience viscerally is how the poor man, Lazarus, is not just with Abraham as if he were a date at the prom, but he’s really, really, really, desperately and gratefully *WITH* him—and vice versa.

I once saw a documentary on something extraordinary that happened in the French village of Le Chambon during the height of its Nazi occupation. It's the story of a little baby, who had been born there to Jewish parents, and how a Christian community of faith—a denomination known as the *Huguenots*—had hid him. Hid him WITH them, in their homes, along with 5,000 others Jews. And every week, you see, the Gestapo would pressure the Vichy police to round up those vermin who infested their streets; and yet, every week, this baby was held at the breasts of men and women who said that they loved the 'People of the Book.' Anyway, as a fully grown adult, Pierre Sauvage came back to the village years after the war ended, and he found some of the folks who had embraced him so closely. And when he went up to hug this rotund woman, named Emma, who had just came in from milking the cows, he turned to the camera and said, "It's like hugging a tree..." Solid. Absolutely solid. Rooted. Deeply rooted... Have you ever been held like that? Embraced like that? Have you ever been the one who's done the holding? The embracing? That's the *Bosom of Abraham* in the flesh. And, of course, this is how the God of Israel and now the God we experience in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ wants to cultivate a reputation. For example, in Jeremiah 22:16, God is speaking through the prophet—remembering how King Josiah had been WITH the poor; and the text says,

***"He judged the cause of the poor and the needy;
then it went well.
Is not this to know me?
says the Lord."***

And so, do we want to know God? Then be with the poor—not just as some charity-case; and be with the needy—not just because you want to be known as a nice person. Psalm 34:18 says, "***The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit."***

And on and on it goes. In fact, if we were to do a deep dive throughout the scriptures—from Abraham, the Father of Many, in Genesis 12, all the way to King Zedekiah in today's first reading, we'd discover how God continually sides WITH those who often considered the losers of a society. Abraham, for instance, was old and feeble; his wife was barren; but it's this childless loser who is blessed to be a blessing to "***all the families of the earth.***" And by contrast, even though Zedekiah's a part of a long line of kings, dating back to Saul, David and Solomon, he becomes infamous because, even as he connives to incarcerate Jeremiah, God plans to separate and to isolate this pompous king far away from the people and the land.

In a September 3rd article in ***The New York Times***, President Xi of China and President Putin of Russia are overheard on what's called a 'hot mic.' In other words, as these two prominent leaders had been watching this impressive parade of military hardware in Beijing—utterly separated from the riff-raff in the crowd—their dialogue was being recorded without them knowing it. And, you see, what these 70-something power-brokers had to say to each other is revealing:

- President Xi: "People rarely lived to be over 70, but these days, at 70, you are still a child."
- President Putin: "Biotechnology is making advances... There'll be constant transplants of human organs, and maybe even people will grow younger as they age—achieving immortality."
- President Xi: "It could be that in this century humans might be able to live to 150 years old."

Now, you may be wondering why I risk veering into this conversation and here's why: in today's gospel there's another 'hot mic' moment that's even more important for us.

“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

Just listen to how that's phrased. You see, even in death the rich man's not wanting to be WITH the poor slob, whom he exploited; he wants to use him, even in the afterlife, as a servant. *Send him here to serve me! Or, send him to my father's house, to my five brothers!* And let's not forget—this is Jesus who is telling this story. This is the apprentice-carpenter who's left his ordinary job to travel around on a shoe-string budget and who will soon be arrested and put to death by those who don't like how he's disrupted the temple economy. And this is Jesus imagining how the ‘hot mic’ moment comes to its conclusion:

“He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’”

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Of course, we're getting closer and closer to Halloween. But my impression here is not that Jesus is trying to scare people into heaven. On the contrary, what he's doing is inviting anyone and everyone who speculates about living forever or living to be 150 years old to do a different sort of calculation, a different sort of estate planning: GIVEN YOUR MORTALITY, WHO ARE YOU WITH? During your limited lifetime, who are you WITH? Are you concerned about your reputation—your legacy—what history will say about you when you're gone? Lazarus has his face firmly planted in the Bosom of Abraham because God's concerned with God's Reputation, not yours, and not mine... And not even the reputation of Northwood Presbyterian Church...

Last week, during the Questions & Conversation time, I mentioned how impressed I've been with the closeness of this fellowship—with the ways you've come to know one another and support one another. There is no doubt in my mind. YOU ARE *WITH* ONE ANOTHER as more than prom dates. But, during this interim time, it's probably wise for all of us to explore who else is out there, who else God is *WITH*.

In the film, *Places in the Heart*, there's a sheriff in a small, country town, who has to excuse himself from the dinner table and take care of a disturbance of the peace. Apparently, there's a drunk teenager who's shooting off a gun down by the railroad tracks. No one's been hurt and no one's in danger... until the Sheriff, standing far off, says to the young, black man, "Riley, are you done?" Riley, then, thinking that he's emptied all the bullets from the chamber, shoots the sheriff by accident. No one in the town, however, believes that. They just hear about a black kid killing a white man, and they tie a noose around his neck and drag him through the streets until he's dead. It's an awful scene that emphasizes this chasm that persists to this day. But something at the end of the film transforms it. Everyone is sitting in church, and they're passing the bread and the cup of Christ, and suddenly, among the men, women and children who are alive, there's the Sheriff and there's Riley, who shot him. And they pass the spiritual food and drink to one another and say, "The Peace of God."

The Peace of God Be *WITH* You.