



St. Paul's Newsletter

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THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE or, what's going on at those Tuesday night community suppers?

By Marshall Keys

Ever since I was a child, I've had a hard time with the conventional idea of heaven. Certainly, the heaven of The Book of Revelation wasn't my style at all, but I was pretty sure that I wasn't going to find all the things in heaven that made this life wonderful, either. I looked forward to sitting around with God listening to Bach and Beethoven, but what if I found myself in the part of Heaven where they loved country music? After all, I had spent a lot of my life in the South, and I might get misclassified!

And then there is the whole question of getting there. I didn't seem to be doing all the things you are supposed to do to get to Heaven. Unlike Pat Boone, I didn't talk to my friend Jesus every day. I was pretty sure I hadn't surrendered my life to Him in any way my Southern Baptist friends would find meaningful. Compared to others, I didn't do much in the way of good works; I didn't tithe or visit the sick and the prisoners or sing in the choir. I pray regularly, but I know my mind wanders, sometimes uncontrollably. I worship regularly at St Paul's, but it is private worship, and I don't really participate in the corporate life of the Church. (I'm the tall, heavy, bald man sitting behind the column on the pulpit side of the church.) I just don't seem much like a likely candidate for heaven. And then I went to the Lord's Supper. No, not the feast of the Eucharist, but to one of the community suppers at St Paul's. And there I found the answer.

Our Lord fed his people on many occasions, and He continues to feed them monthly at St. Paul's. Our Lord constantly spoke in parables and in similes, ("faith is like a grain of mustard seed") to show us how to understand His message. As I attended the community suppers, I found in them the living parable I needed to understand Heaven and my place in it.

So my parable begins, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a community supper at St Paul's." You can't buy your way in because the price has already been paid, but the door is open to anyone who will turn the handle. It doesn't matter if you are old or young, rich or poor, clever or slow, fat or thin, white or brown, yel-



All are welcome at a recent community supper in Gardner Hall.

low or black, a worthy citizen or a complete wastrel. The invitation has been sent, and all you have to do is respond by showing up.

Someone may ask how you are doing, but no one asks if you've been bad or good today, kind or crabby, or in love and charity with your neighbors and intending to lead a new life. That's between you and God. No one cares if you are an Episcopalian or a Bahá'í, a Nantucketer or a New Yorker, an American or an illegal alien, employed or unemployed or living on your dividends. Those are not distinctions God makes. Nobody asks whether you are a homeowner, a renter, or sleeping in your car. No one cares if you are there because you need a meal or because you need to be with other people or don't need anything at all. All that matters is that you opened the door and walked in.

You open the door, you walk in, you pick up your plate, and someone fills it with food. When you are through, depending on how many other people came, you may be able to go back, and they will fill it with more. For everyone that asketh, receiveth. If you want to help clean up, you can, but no one will ask you to or resent it if you don't. There's no evangelism, but if you want to bring a friend next week, that's fine, and it's even better if you bring a stranger. You could offer to help cook the meal one week, and it would be appreciated, but you don't have to and that is okay, too. There's no collection, no sermon, no lecturing. There is only love and the expectation that you treat everyone else who is there with the same acceptance, with the same love, with which you yourself are accepted and loved.

Bert Mackiernan brought tears to my eyes when he wrote in a letter to the Inky several years ago: *"When I go to supper there on Tuesday nights, they welcome me without reservation or condition. There's no basket for donations, no sermon, no literature is passed out, they just thank me for showing up and serve me a nice dinner. The point is love without judgment. They figured out what Jesus meant when he said, 'Love one another.' He didn't list any conditions. They love me the way Jesus does, and it works."*

We Christians have devised a lot of different ways to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the Presbyterian Church of my father, the Elders brought round little papery wafers and tiny glasses of grape juice. We Episcopalians go to the altar and receive bread or wafers and wine; Roman Catholic lay people normally receive the wafer but the wine is reserved for the priest. We Christians have argued for centuries whether Christ is a real presence in the bread and wine: Protestants see His presence as symbolic, Roman Catholics believe His presence is real, and of course Episcopalians adopt their usual middle position by defining it as a mystery we cannot fully understand!

I believe that Christ's presence at the St Paul's community supper is real. I understand for the first time what it means to find Christ in and through others, and I am convinced that the acceptance, the sharing, the openness that characterizes these dinners is a true reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven. Life as lived in the community suppers is life as God means us to live it.

How happy this must make Our Lord! How it must bring Him joy to see the miracle of the loaves and fishes taking place right here on Nantucket! What pleasure He must take seeing his children—Episcopalians and Baptists and Bahá'ís and Catholics and Orthodox and agnostics—sharing His feast without bickering over doctrines or differences that will matter not at all when we see His face! How pleased He must be to see us experience the kingdom of heaven right here, every Tuesday night, right now, on our own little island, and it is all so simple. All we have to do is walk through the door! The price is paid. And for the folks in the kitchen, the folks setting up and taking down, the folks who have cooked or contributed their loaves and fishes, how little you knew that your service to others is service of the most direct kind to God. Through you, we find Him.