

One Big Dinner Party **August 28, 2022**

The past couple months, I have been re-reading one of my favorite series of books. The series is called *His Dark Materials*. The first book of the original trilogy is called *The Golden Compass*, of which they made a movie series years ago. The story follows a young girl as she navigates a magical world.

During her adventures, this girl meets a woman named Mrs. Coulter, who is a complicated character. It's hard for the reader to place Mrs. Coulter as wholly good or wholly evil, but it's clear that she is incredibly ambitious. She has climbed the ranks of power in this world using her sharp intelligence and capable leadership, but also through flattery, bribery, manipulation, and outright lying.

One character, in meeting Mrs. Coulter for the first time, sees through her web of deceit. This observer notes that every gesture, every word, every change in tone of voice, every facial expression, every pause in conversation is carefully calculated for her own advantage. There is a reason for every minute action Mrs. Coulter performs.

And these subtleties work. She becomes one of the most powerful and influential people in her home country, and when she travels abroad, she inevitably finds her way into power.

What becomes clear in the end, though, is that this power cannot help Mrs. Coulter from feeling unfulfilled. Ultimately, she abandons all of her hard-earned positions to protect her daughter, risking her reputation and even her life to do so.

You and I all have a little Mrs. Coulter in us. We are logical, practical beings, and hopefully we consider the consequences of our actions before we do them.

For example, imagine you are invited to a dinner party. You might plan out what you'll wear. You might wonder who else is invited. When you arrive, you might seek out the host to thank him or her for the evening.

But we're also creatures of feelings and imagination and relationship. At that party, we might get lost in an interesting conversation with a friend. We might laugh as someone tells a joke. We might reminisce of a past party and how much fun it was.

To put it simply, we are both logical and emotional beings. We both calculate and we feel.

At another dinner party, many centuries ago, Jesus examines the logical side of the party. After observing for a bit, Jesus speaks up and addresses the guests, who (it appears) are establishing on a pecking order based on who sits closest to the host. These negotiations in Jesus' day could get nasty; guests might lie or trick someone to get a good seat. Others might argue loudly to make someone else feel uncomfortable and bully their way into a good position.

But Jesus says, “Stop calculating. Stop jockeying for position; stop politicking. In fact, sit in the lowest position, and if appropriate, you might be invited to move up.” And maybe, just maybe, enjoy the conversation with the people around you.

So those are the instructions for the guests. Next Jesus speaks to the host (and any potential hosts): “Don’t invite people to dinner because you want something out of them. Don’t connive to build yourself up. Instead, do something that makes no logical sense: invite people who will offer you no social advantage: the poor, the disabled, the forgotten.” And maybe, enjoy your time with them.

The underlying message is that God’s kingdom focuses on relationship, not power. To quote a phrase from Jeremiah that comes up twice in our reading, there are things that “do not profit.” Worrying where you sit at a dinner party... does not profit. Inviting important people who are well-respected so that you look good... does not profit.

What does profit? We see the answer in our reading from Hebrews. Love profits. Mutual love (Greek word is *philadelphia*) is a wonderful thing. What will profit? Offering hospitality, even to strangers. Caring for people in prison or in chronic pain will profit. Being faithful to your spouse will profit. Not being greedy will profit. Remembering that Christ is always with us – that will profit.

All of those things will feed you and bring you life. And the language of money, of profit, works here, because those things require an investment. It takes work to love others, to be hospitable, to treat your spouse well. But that energy is well invested, because you will reap more than you put in. You will come away with a profit.

The language of money and profit reminds me of a poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front,” by Wendell Berry. I’d like to share a section of the poem with you. Berry begins by critiquing our consumeristic society:

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made.*

...

*When they want you to buy something,
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit, they will let you know.*

And then Berry shifts his tone.

*So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.*

*Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.*

...

*Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.*

I love the idea of re-thinking about what we value, what we call “profit.” Jesus invites his followers at that dinner party to consider what will bring profit, what will bring life. Like in the poem, Jesus points out that power and prestige will not bring life, but hospitality, community, and vulnerability will.

Of course, this teaching isn’t just about dining etiquette. Jesus’ society (and ours too) is a dinner party writ large. There are no hosts or guests, but in our larger world, there are politicians, rulers, wealthy donors, lobbyists, and powerful families with a lot of influence.

What Jesus is giving us is nothing less than a new way of operating as a society. There is the way the world works, and completely different from that is the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom, there is no politicking or calculating maneuvers, but simply presence and community, mutual love, hospitality, faithfulness.

In fact, there are some theologians who say that our society is inherently un-Christian, because selfishness, manipulation, and dishonesty are rewarded, while truth, goodness, and self-giving love are discouraged.

What we need, these theologians wrote, is a “social gospel.” We need to allow the teachings of Jesus to transform not only our lives but the world at large. What would it look like if there was no politicking for position, no exploitation of the poor, but only concern for our neighbors?

What if our nation and globe looked like the kingdom of God?

Rauschenbusch, Walter. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. New York: MacMillan, 1917.

That is a pretty big call. It’s a good question to keep in mind, though, as you read the news or watch the events of the world. Ask yourself, how is this not of God? Who profits here? What how would this look different if we respected the dignity of every human being?

The end of Wendell Berry’s poem offers a bit of hope, and I’ll close with this.

*Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.*

...

Practice resurrection.

Berry, Wendell. “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” All Poetry, accessed August 25, 2022. <https://allpoetry.com/poem/12622463-Manifesto--The-Mad-Farmer-Liberation-Front-by-Wendell-Berry>

Foster the things in our world that bring true profit.

Amen.