

For You -- Easter 5C

One of the great American plays, written by Moss Hart and George Kaufman for the stage and screen, deals with the hijinks and unconventional lifestyle of a wacky family on New York's Upper West Side. Presided over by Grandpa (John Barrymore's part), they come to ideological blows with the much more conventionally proper and wealthy Kirby family, when granddaughter Alice Sycamore falls in love with son Tony Kirby. Grandpa Vanderhof at one point delivers the signature speech of the play to Tony's Dad: "Maybe this'll stop you trying to be so desperate about making more money than you can ever use. You can't take it with you Mr. Kirby, so what good is it? As near as I can see, the only thing you can take with you is the love of your friends."

You Can't Take It With You is of course the name of the play, and it's one of the USA's most accurate and entertaining self-analyses. Most of the serious decision-making and reality-facing in the family takes place around the dinner table, and that's what makes the play hit home so effectively. Those of us who grew up having dinner together with our families most every night, are aware of the powerful effect it had on us. Yes there are plenty of horror stories, but many a study has shown that family dinners nurture souls as well as bodies. It's at the table we learn our values and how to question those of others. For those of us who didn't grow up this way, God is longing to offer us this kind of loving interaction and formation in other ways. Find the place where true stories get told, where true (albeit tough) love is on display, and where, whatever the outside world is putting us through, acceptance is always available (with an occasional time-out).

As we continue our exploration of John's Gospel, we work back from its wondrous conclusion for earlier clues about who we are as the family of Christ, and how we must live, now that Jesus has claimed, then left, us. We are bidden both to accept our condition as human beings and to revel in the awareness of being part of something far greater than ourselves. We are also instructed to feed God's sheep, ie: each other. Today we are commanded to "Love one another, as I have loved you." Jesus is at the dinner table with his family, and the outside world is about to put him through something unspeakable. He is at the dinner table where all are accepted, even that bad apple Judas, who rushes off before the dessert, and who misses the best and truest story. That is the story Jesus tells next: You can't take anything with you except the love of your friends. Just like old Grandpa Vanderhof would say at the Booth Theater in New York nineteen hundred and three years later.

But what does Jesus mean by calling this a new commandment? Holy scripture has been talking about neighbor love for hundreds of years, at least since Leviticus, and doubtless long before. What's new about this commandment? Love one another as I have loved you. Isn't that just Good Samaritan talk? We got that already, The Golden Rule – it's common to all the world's great religions. So what's new? What is the deeper truth, the greater authenticity Jesus wants the family to get ahold of tonight around the dinner table. What is the next level of love?

The great storyteller Ira Glass observed that stories can be boiled down to the following formula: $1+1=2$. That makes a story. But, says Glass, the stories that we remember, that transform us, the ones we love proceed according to the formula $1+1=3$. What's an example? Lover+Lover = Family... Poet+fork in the woods=All the difference... and the story we

talk about here, Fisherpeople+Jesus=Grace. What is it about loving as Jesus loved that makes 1 and 1 into threeness, trinitation, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, threebility...?

I know a man whose story might give us a clue as to what Jesus is trying to get us to live like. Now this fellow would blush for shame or maybe laugh out loud if he thought we were talking about him as an 'Imitation of Christ' or some sort of model, but his story does shed a little light on that threebility. Mike fell in love and got married. He and his wife had a baby, and they sat at a dinner table that had belonged to great-great-grandparents, and where every night they came together to play with the baby and wipe carrots and worse off the floor and the high chair. It was sweet.

Now Mike's job was exciting, but it took him away from home quite a bit. In his field, your success can be measured by how little you are home. So one day, he's in the middle of a job, and he gets a call from home: "The baby just took her first step." Much to the amazement and somewhat to the embarrassment of the people on the jobsite, Mike gets all choked up and has to take his own time-out. Within a few weeks, he decided his priorities were wrong. He quit his job and found a way to work close to home, where he wouldn't miss any more milestones, and the dinner table would be an everyday reality instead of an occasional holiday. So far, so good. If you can manage it, arrange your life so you can care for and be cared for by those you love. Nothing new about that.

Fast-forward a few years. Now there are three babies, and Mike's life is chock full of their doings – it's wonderful. But his wife and Joe have sought counseling and come to realize that their connection is nowhere near deep or strong enough to last

a lifetime. They agree to divorce. At first there is some bitter fighting, some acrimony, with each of them adamant about this, that or the other thing. But here is where grace came into their lives in the person of a gifted therapist and the spiritual gift of willingness to change. Here is where Mike and Laura's family story went from 1 and 1 equaling 2 to the threeness Jesus commands; that old threability. From the time of their separation, and continuing to this day (with a couple early kerfuffles), the two have remained a family in this sense: each tries to live by the motto, "It is my business to want our children to have the best possible relationship with their other parent."

It sounds simple, but it is revolutionary. It is in fact resurrectional. The marriage ended, but the family rose again and have prospered. Last week we said that Jesus did not come to abolish the human condition, but to transform it. People split up. Couples divorce; that is the human condition. But oh the transformation when a commitment to love and care is maintained (even enhanced) beyond the separation! In our story from Acts today, Peter goes through a dream seminar and oral exam on the subject of inclusiveness, with the same result. No matter how estranged or combative or strange our neighbor may be, they are just as much children of God as we are. But more: our vocation, our hope, our salvation as Christians is to have our first priority be that the other one, the prickly neighbor, the "ex" have everything we want out of life. It's a tall order, it's a scary fantasy, it's a risky business. But that is the new commandment Jesus gives his family at the dinner table: make friends with your enemies, and then whatever comes up, whatever goes down, make it your business to love one another juuuuuust a little more than you love yourselves.

The New Heaven and New Earth come about when we become willing to get well Jesus' way, not when we triumph over others? Are we willing to have a beginner's mind, a follower's heart as a basis for our daily living? Can we turn things over to God's good guidance as a way to get out of the argument and stop fighting? These are the only hope we have for tackling issues such as intolerance, bigotry, isolation, disconnectedness and self-absorption. It's not enough just to be alive: we will know a New Jerusalem only when we find joy in compassionate service and self-forgetting.