



Worship Resources for *Steeple*s Ad Run – Fall 2008

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Respectable, Rabble-Rousing Church People

As much as our culture wants to equate Christianity with good etiquette — saying the right things and acting according to social custom — nothing could be further from the discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

Perhaps in some circles, it does matter that your purse matches your shoes, or that you use the appropriate fork with the right course at a fancy dinner party, but what I admire most about Jesus is how willing he is to kick tradition to the curb if it gets in the way of doing what's right.

"Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." This is not the kind of thing you're supposed to say to respectable church folk, but it's exactly the kind of phrase that makes Jesus sound like Jesus — and not Martha Stewart.

There's a lot about the Christian tradition that's earnestly good, sweet and even laudable — like Christmas pageants and choral anthems, prayers before meals and staying away from foul language in polite company — but none of that would ever make it to the top of Jesus' list of biggies.

At first glance, "all the people" — the inclusive refrain from the UCC's heartwarming TV ad — can be understood only as nicety or sentimentality. After all, it's a word of welcome. And who doesn't appreciate that? It compels our church greeters to offer their firmest handshakes and warmest welcomes for first-time Sunday visitors. It propels all of us to take inventory of our systemic hospitality. Got parking and good signage? Got an up-to-date web site? Got name tags?

But it's more than that. Lest we forget, "all the people" is also a radical justice claim. A slogan with expectations and ramifications — and the fallout from all that can get ugly.

Such a bold message extends beyond smiling faces to how we — as a church and society — promote inclusion over exclusion among the marginalized, in housing and employment, along our nation's borders.

Our church's somewhat-sappy refrain demands more of us than better behavior, but stronger conviction as well.

“All the people” challenges closely held assumptions about who is worthy, what is holy, who is in. When the masses begin to accept our great-banquet invitations, as Jesus hopes, the fellowship halls will get messier than some of us would like.

It has been argued that Jesus never intended to found a new religion or start the institution we now know as “church.” But he did set out to renew the faith of his lineage and invite others to think anew about old traditions and ancient texts. This is our moment to give some serious thought to what it means when Christians insist that “all the people” are welcome here. What would become of *us* if that were really true?

I’m not sure if Jesus would necessarily care that much about the steeples and other edifices that we’ve erected in his honor, but I know he would be concerned about how we treat one another. So, during this ad run, in the midst of frightening economic uncertainties and a divisive political climate, let’s allow our “all the people” TV message to challenge and change us — just as much as we hope that others, because of it, will decide to pay us a visit.