

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.28.22

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (470)

I heard tell of a girl who had a conflict one weekend. The choir she was in had an important retreat at the beginning of its program year. But she had a family obligation that same weekend.

She would arrive late to the choir retreat, which was away from the city, an hour or two north or west, in some quiet, pastoral setting. Maybe New Hampshire. Maybe the Berkshires. I don't know the details.

This was the Harvard choir, and the choir master wanted to spirit the choristers away to some place where they could bang through the music for coming school year. But this girl had a conflict.

The solution would be a private jet. Her father would hire one to get her from the family obligation to the pastoral setting. Or maybe he had one? Or maybe it was a rented helicopter.

I heard tell of this. I was an adjunct member of this choir, so I never went on the retreats. And that whole thing preceded my time at the Divinity School.

I did know the girl though, sort of. She was a student at Harvard College when I'd arrived at the Divinity School and joined, as an adjunct, the University Choir where we were both sopranos. She wanted to have lunch with me once. She asked if I could meet her at one of the college dining halls, which I did. She wanted to ask me about becoming a pastor. How did I come to have this idea? Did I like the preparation for it so far? What sort of church would I eventually serve? She was an Episcopalian. Did I think this was a good idea for her?

I was flattered she wanted to talk with me about this, and I was surprised she might be discerning a call to ministry. I encouraged her, told her I was loving everything I was finding along the way.

But (I'll admit now, though I didn't admit it to her at the time) that whole private jet thing: that might be a problem. The culture of church wasn't really about private jets. Or helicopters.

The conversation did close in on this cultural gap, slowly, circuitously. She didn't disclose much, as is typical of that sort. People with real money hold that fact close their vests. Money talks, they say; wealth whispers. But if you know the tones of that whispering, you can sort of catch the meaning.

I'd learned the tones, to a certain degree. I've been an adjunct amidst real wealth more than a few times. My ancestors were on the Mayflower, but mine was the one who fell off. (True story. Look it up. John Howland. They fished him back onboard, obviously.)

We finally landed on it. Could she disentangle herself from the enticements and obligations of posh parties? How did she feel about potluck feasts? Does she like casseroles? And how would her family feel in telling their friends that she'd joined the clergy, spent serious time in church fellowship halls with people, well, people like us? I mean, it's not for everybody—though it is to be for everybody.

Everybody.

Hospitality is a word that appears in the Bible in its Greek *philoxena*. This is literally “love of the strange.” Hear it in its opposite: *xenophobia*, hatred or fear of the strange. *Philoxena*: the church is to be marked by this quality: love of the strange. Strange bedfellows, odd assortments are we, or are we to be.

When Jack was young and was describing his favorite thrift stores to a young friend who'd never been to one, he extolled these as places filled with "unassorted jibs jabs." This has become a high compliment in the idiom of the Goodmans: any place filled with unassorted jib jabs.

The church—this grand rehearsal for what's to come, the resurrection of the righteous, the renewal of all creation. We practice here what will be perfected in the end.

On the one hand, what Jesus has to say to us this morning is easy, which isn't always the case. Quite the opposite, so often what he has to say is puzzling, suggestive and indirect, parables that confound as much as they clarify. When he answers a question put to him, it's often to the effect of many more questions than any clear answers, to say nothing of dictates.

Today, though, his stories are clear in their implication. Really, though they're presented as parables, ("...he told them a parable...") they're more like good advice, easy to understand though not necessarily to implement. When you're a guest, as he was just now, and watching his fellow guests, how to approach the table to find a suitable seat; when you're a host, as he was being hosted just now and watching his host maneuver as such, whom to invite so your feast is about friendship and not transactional, about social climbing.

Jesus, it seems, wasn't the most gracious guest. He noticed too much, noticed the things polite society would have us not notice. And then he commented on it. And, no surprise, his commentary is a continuation of a favorite theme in the gospel according to Luke, one we've become well versed in this year, this Year C which has us following the Gospel of Luke. The great reversal. God's coming to the world in Jesus Christ would usher in a great reversal. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. The mighty shall be brought down off their thrones and the lowly shall be lifted up. The hungry shall be filled with good things while the rich shall be sent away empty.

"Blessed are you who are poor," he said, "for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

"Blessed are you who are hungry now," he said, "for you will be filled. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

And this can be tough to take, as it perhaps was for those party-goers to whom Jesus was speaking, as it likely was for that host to whom Jesus spoke. Though good news for the lowly, this might be tough to take for those who are rich, for those who (like me) don't tend to hunger and can tend to find their own consolation. Because no one wants to lose like that. You'll do anything not to lose like that, do anything not to suffer both the hunger and the humiliation. It's one thing

to *be* lowly. It's another thing to *become* lowly. That's a double-whammy. You'll do anything not to suffer that double-whammy.

There are people who say that the generating spirit of our day is this defensive reaction against loss, whether real loss or perceived loss. It is the generating spirit of our politics, they say, this reaction, this loss aversion made nearly violent. In extreme was the march in Charlottesville five years ago, the chant by which those apparently mostly White men defined their cause, "You will not replace us." Less explicit are so many undercurrents in our society. People don't want to lose their place. People don't want to suffer the humiliation of lowered status.

It's a powerfully uneasy-making prospect, which power it seems Jesus understood, the compounding shame of not just low status but loss of status. For this, he advised, "...do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place." No, instead, "But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you."

But better still than this is removing yourself altogether from any such gathering where calculation and transaction are in play at all. Better still is simply gathering with people who will enjoy the feast for its own sake, who will enjoy the company not as a means to another end but as an end in itself, full and good, intrinsic in worth, simply the being together. Don't invite people from whom you await reciprocity. Invite people who will simply enjoy being invited, will simply enjoy being together.

Well, if it was a counter-cultural move in Jesus' day, which it seems it might have been, otherwise such advice would not have been needed, then it's all the more a counter-cultural move today. Neoliberalism has trawled everything into its market calculation. Neoliberalism, this ideological regime amidst which we live, has cast every conceivable human interaction and experience in terms of market value. Writing in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in 2016, columnist George Monbiot, explains, "Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that 'the market' delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning," neither government planning nor any collective attempts at achieving a common goal.

Really, with neoliberalism, the best we can hope for is to buy our way out of whatever problems we have. The best we can hope for is fulfillment of our desire, your desire and my desire, for there is hardly a “we” in neoliberalism.

This, though your desire, as soon as fulfilled, will find another object, and is therefore a fickle guide for finding your way in life.

Good luck.

You’re on your own.

But, look, here’s a shiny object.

Come and get it, otherwise I might get it first.

But don’t worry, there are a lot of these. Mass production and all.

Then again, there’s only this one.

This week I read a book that I’d recommend to others, and maybe to our churches book club. *Naming Neoliberalism: Exposing the Spirit of Our Age* has Rodney Clapp writing with an audience of clergy and “serious lay people” in mind. It’s a swift, broad read, and it could be criticized for lacking nuance. But it’s more of an extended, impassioned sermon than a fine analysis of political or economic theory—and he concludes it with a serious take on what the church is and means in such a neoliberal age.

“In this spirit, I want to conclude with some words about a mundane, basic practice of Christians that we too easily overlook...I mean our act of gathering to worship. To get out of bed on a Sunday morning, to go be with other Christians for prayer and praise, seems simple and relatively insignificant. But it is not. The coronavirus pandemic, for all its destruction, reminded us how precious and crucial it is to gather: to see and touch others, to consume together the body and blood of Christ—that is, the *life* of Christ—[so to be] constituted as the body of Christ...

“No wonder, when we stop to think about it. We are creatures made to worship...and I mean worship in the sense of ascribing worth to something or someone...We gather in stadiums and rise for the national anthem, and so we ascribe worth. We gather in supermarkets and malls, and so we ascribe worth [for better or for worse] to shopping and consumerism. We gather in restaurants and camping grounds [or on the Tanglewood lawn] and so we ascribe worth to good food, [beautiful art,] and time away closer to creation...

“Furthermore, our gatherings are not simply expressive of individual needs, wants, and self-understanding. Rather, gatherings are formative: ‘Because human beings are social creatures, when

they gather together they inevitably presuppose and reinforce much about the shape, meaning, and purpose of the world that they understand themselves to inhabit.”

Neoliberalism knows this—to the degree that an ideology can “know” anything, and especially one that is as dodgy and self-denying as neoliberalism is, purporting to be natural, purporting to be the natural end of all of history’s machinations. Neoliberalism knows this about the human need, and it’s managed to co-opt and commodify nearly every gathering, nearly every pretext and context for gathering. Even the most “counter-cultural” gatherings have been commodified for marketplace consumerism. I mean, you can buy a Woodstock t-shirt at the mall shop Pac-Sun. It’s right there on the rack next to a t-shirt with the Playboy logo on it and just across the way from a cap imploring that Black Lives Matter.

But there is one.

There is yet one outlier, one cultural phenomenon that hasn’t been commodified, not totally, and I imagine never will be: the church. This one bastion. This one mainstay.

—which isn’t to say every iteration of church is so resistant. There are, of course, some, I’d say many, gatherings that proclaim themselves church but that bear the marks of the marketplace, that resemble in architecture and in spirit more shopping mall than sanctuary, that resemble a place for social climbing rather than repose in God with others of the people of God.

I imagine it comes as little surprise that not so this place. At least I *hope* it comes as little surprise that my aim is here not to be a place for climbing but for repose, that here we might find not competition but companionship.

Because I, for one, can’t keep up. With the world out there, with the fast and the fabulous, the once-called jet-set: I can’t keep up. Remember, I come from people who fall off ships. But I’m okay with that because here’s this old ship of Zion, the church, slow, slow.

Find a seat, whichever calls to you. Settle in. Receive as you need and serve as you can, all guests of a host who welcomes all in.

Thanks be to God.