

Pentecost 14
September 2, 2007
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St. John's church buildings sit in the midst of downtown. This means that for those of us who are the church, a church is not a building but a people, neighbor can mean variety of things. Our neighbors range from rising young professionals, to those who live in the rental property and housing projects near our church property and even the homeless man who is often found sleeping behind the bushes. St. John's church property is a glorious island of historical value in the midst of a changing city landscape. We constantly have to redefine ourselves and our ministries as companies downsize or migrate to other regions of the country, and people move from the city to the suburbs causing the racial demographics of the city to change. The situation we find ourselves in as a parish is not unlike many churches in once busy downtown areas of cities across our nation. Constantly we have to ask, what is our mission? How can we be present with our neighbors and serve our neighbors as an expression of God's love?

Part of our vision as a parish is to grow in service. We have expressed that by involvement in ongoing ministries throughout the city, in our diocese and beyond in other communities. We have used our resources to share God's love reaching out in love and concern for other people. It is not uncommon for me to arrive at the office on Monday morning and be greeted by a man or woman wanting to know when the food bank opens and if they can get some food. On Sunday after the service it would be nice to come to Coffee Hour, go right home and have lunch with Elaine or with a member of the congregation, instead I find a neighbor wanting to talk to me about their need for a bus ticket or money to pay a bill. The people of St. John understand we are not a church community for our own convenience but an expression of God's love and grace in this corner of the world.

What has that to do with the Bible readings for today? The readings appointed for today challenge us, the church, to be a radical expression of God's mercy in a world. Love is not a smile and a pat on the back at the door. Being vehicles of God's grace challenges to engage those among us who find themselves in shelters, struggling with drug habits or seeking shelter from the fear of violence on our community streets. The readings for today challenge us to become uncomfortable, as the church, for the sake of the Gospel.

In today's Gospel Jesus dines in the home of a ruler among the Pharisees on the Sabbath. There is growing antagonism among the Pharisees against Jesus with regard to ritual observances. Luke tells us the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely.

The setting of a shared meal is important for the Gospel writer Luke. Luke implies that such a meal is a foretaste of God's kingdom, symbolic of the Messianic Banquet where all are welcomed. Luke says a number of significant things happen during this meal. For some reason our appointed reading skips the first event. A man with dropsy is present. Jesus asks the Pharisees if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. His question is answered with silence, so he heals the man and sends him on his way.

Turning to the Pharisees, Jesus justifies his actions based on laws outlined in the Biblical Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 22:4 states, "You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; but you shall help to lift it up." The law demands an effort to help and not to ignore the any need of assistance. Jesus asks, who among them would not follow the law and assist a neighbor by responding to a distressed animal even if it were the Sabbath. Again Jesus' question is met with silence.

So, Jesus tells a parable. The hosts for this feast are accustomed to being in positions of respect. They enjoy places of honor and have come to expect the same. Not only do the Pharisees enjoy seats of honor in the synagogue but Luke tells us they expect the same on social occasions.

Jesus talks about a wedding feast. Wedding feasts are arranged so guests recline in groups of three. The position in the middle is the most honored position and reserved for those with the most power, wealth or status. If a more eminent person were to arrive late at the feast the person occupying that position would be asked to step down to allow the late comer to assume the position of honor.

Therefore, Jesus concludes, it is better to sit at a less prestigious place with the possibility of being asked to move up. In the lower place, the worst that can happen is one remains in the same position. If one sits in a lesser position, that individual might be asked to move up and thus be given a position that befits importance. Noticing how people attempt to act important and to seek positions of importance so they can lord over others, Jesus adds the phrase,

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

To make the point even edgier, Jesus goes on to describe Gospel hospitality. Jesus warns that Gospel hospitality is not a transaction.

Prentiss and Harriet lived a small southern town. They went to school together and were married in their early twenties. They had two children who attended the same schools they attended. Prentiss thought he owned the town. He did own the buildings occupied by the local drug store, grocery store and variety store. He had invested a major interest in the local marina and feed store. He was a founding member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Department or Recreation, served three terms as the town mayor; but by no means did he own the town. He and his family were Episcopalians. Prentiss had served as senior warden twice and was very generous in his support of the parish. He always assumed that people knew who he was and were ready to do what he wanted. He would stand up tall, thrust his hand out and introduce himself with so much gusto that his children were embarrassed. Prentiss thought it was his duty to put his town on the map. After all in his eyes, it was the most wonderful place on the earth. Prentiss would travel, even to other countries, and come home declaring his town had everything anyone could want or need. Prentiss died in his early seventies, a big fish in a very small pond.

Why did I tell this story? To point out that the very pride Jesus was confronting in his own day continues to occupy lives in our world today. Whether it is pride in ourselves, our town, our looking right, our success, or being in the place of honor, it is there. Pride is there isolating us from each other and from God. "The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart is withdrawn from its Maker." Pride blurs our vision and hides our need for one another.

What is the antidote to pride? Jesus says Gospel hospitality. Hospitality seems to be a lost art in the world we live in. Where did we get the idea that hospitality was reciprocal? Hospitality is not a transaction, a gift with an anticipated return. It has nothing to do with social status or a return commitment. Hospitality is an unconditional gesture, a offering of love. We offer hospitality knowing we cannot control the outcome.

The minute hospitality is intended for a particular group to the exclusion of others, it is no longer authentic. Jesus makes the point that Gospel hospitality

requires a willingness to enter into relationships and events in which we do not have control of the outcome. It means creating an environment where everyone is welcome. Hospitality means connecting with another even if it is not convenient or socially acceptable.

So, how do we extend this Gospel hospitality as a parish? We continue to be a neighbor to all who share our downtown location. We accept those who are not just like us. We care about the needs of people who knock on the door. We say to all, "Come the feast is prepared. Share with us a place of honor at our Lord's table."