

Proper 17 – 14 Pentecost – Year C – September 1, 2010 - Homily
Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14
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At my graduation from the Diocesan Fresh Start program for clergy who are new to the Diocese, Bishop Smith told the story of one of his colleagues who had just been installed as a new Bishop. After the service was over, the new Bishop had taken a leisurely route home, and stopped at a small café for refreshment. In classic Anglican style, the new Bishop was wearing his purple shirt, collar, and a rather large pectoral cross. Noting his unusual attire, no doubt compared to the usual clientele of the café, the waitress came up and asked the Bishop, “What’s with the fancy dress? Who are you anyway?” Just another friendly and inquisitive greeting at any small town café in anywhere, U.S.A., we might assume! Without really thinking, the Bishop simply answered her question, “I’m the Bishop”. “Well, la de da!” the waitress replied, “And would his worship like cream with his coffee today?”

Table fellowship is high on Luke’s agenda throughout his gospel writing. The reason is because of the way that 1st century Judean society used table fellowship, invitations, and banquets as a means to promoting social status, and the great divide between the have nots and the haves. For example, there was no question of inviting someone who would not or could not reciprocate with a follow up dinner invitation. It was also common to invite those who would increase the hosts honor and prestige in the community, establishing useful relationships. In other words, there was simply no advantage to sharing a meal with a poor person, who could not offer anything in return. Social climbing is hardly a new concept! Jesus exhorts the dinner guests to begin to see table fellowship in broader terms as an eternal banquet at God’s table where all are welcome. Also in terms of generosity of spirit, giving and sharing with the poor for no return. Then there’s the aspect of humility – not thinking of ourselves as better or worse than others, whatever our education, social connections, ethnicity and so on. Exercising the virtue of humility generally continues to be a struggle for many of us, especially when we are invited to a special function. How many of us can resist looking around to see who got the best seats? Giving for the sheer joy of giving is part of Jesus’ living embodiment of Godly character. Hospitality as a way to break down cultural walls is truly kingdom living.

When I read the passage from the Gospel, I had to smile, because at our Great Thanksgiving feast, which we will celebrate here tonight, and which we celebrate every Sunday, so few of us want to sit right up front! I wonder how many of us could honestly say that it is an act of humility when we sit at the back of the sanctuary. How wonderful it would be if we all realized that this is one banquet hall where our gracious host, Jesus Christ, is not going to embarrass anyone sitting up front, by asking them to move further back. Quite the contrary, in fact! I also smiled with pride for the special gift of hospitality that this community embodies. Not just the hospitality of our faith in Christ Jesus, but the wonderful welcome extended to everyone who walks through these doors. Not just the gracious hospitality of sharing food and resources with the hungry and the poorest among us, like our gifts to the Love Kitchen, but also the invitation extended to the broader community to be fed by God, and God’s love in this place.

Theologian Karl Barth understood the role of hospitality for the Body of Christ as one of

breaking down cultural barriers, and building God's kingdom. As a community, when the church reaches out to nations and offers the gift of unity it breaks down national, ethnic and linguistic barriers. The church is called to dismantle racial fences as well. The Body of Christ is a gathering of all in the unity of the Holy Spirit, which overcomes cultural differences. Fourthly, the church recognizes and values diversity in its members from every possible background: rich or poor, highly educated or under-educated, overworked or unemployed. There is no class distinction within the Body of Christ. The purpose of Jesus' mission was the reconciliation and unity of the whole of creation to God. The purpose of our continuing mission to the world is the reconciliation and unity of the whole of creation to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. A large part of that reconciliation involves being agents of healing to the people of this broken, fragmented and divided world. Hospitality is characteristic of God, and one of the many forms of ministry extended and embodied by the Christian community.

Putting Jesus' parable under the microscope shows us how His life and ministry reverses all the rules of earthly hospitality to model God's kingdom hospitality, where all are welcome and all are equal in God's sight. The motivations for our actions are also under the microscope. Jesus invites us to avoid social climbing and hospitality for the sake of reciprocity. Instead, Jesus tells us that the real blessing of hospitality comes from sharing God's good gifts with those who are poor or socially ostracized, the outcasts, and the marginalized. Having dinner with friends and family is fine, as long as we are mindful of giving to those who have nothing to give in return, except perhaps gratitude to God. We cannot be church if our doing is inwardly focused. Reaching out our hands and hearts with love is living into our mission as Christ's disciples. It is one way that we share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The advice of Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-8) and the words of the ancient hymn recorded there are apt here. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross." Christ's humility was born of confidence and trust in God. Jesus never exploited others and refused to be exploited by others who would use Him and His gifts for their own purposes. According to God's plan for the church, the more that we eat and drink from the Lord's Table; take sustenance from the well of life in Christ; the more Christ becomes a physical part of who we are, and transforms us from within. The more we empty ourselves in humble service and obedience to our Lord, the more available we become to the fullness of Christ. And that makes us a blessing to all.

Amen.