

Sirach 10:12-18

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Have you ever been invited to a special social event and then wandered into a large group of people and wondered where you belonged in the crowd? It's a really awkward feeling. When it happens to me, I'm not always sure what to do. Should I look for the host and hostess and check in with them? Should I look around the room to see if there are people there that I know? Should I just take a seat and wait to figure out what to do? It's enough to send most of us scurrying off to consult with Miss Manners. If the same thing has happened to you, then you know that finding our place in a social setting is not always that easy.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus finds himself in the same sort of situation. When he walks into the home of a Pharisee as the invited guest to a Sabbath day meal, he witnesses the same sort of phenomenon. He watches as people shuffle around trying to figure out where they can sit. As is true in many formal social gatherings, there are designated seats of honor which are usually in close proximity to the host. Jesus assumes and even seems to accept the fact that there is a certain pecking order of important people at this gathering. And apparently there aren't any place cards telling people where to sit, so Jesus gives all of them some shrewd advice.

Jesus is an educated Jewish rabbi, so he takes a passage straight out of the Book of Proverbs (25:6-7) that says: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." He warns the folks there not to assume a place of honor because if someone else who is more important shows up, the host will move them out of the place of honor to one of the lower places at the table. To be publicly moved down a notch or two would be a disgrace and a terrible humiliation. And this is a culture that is based on shame and honor. Jesus is telling them how to protect themselves and to prevent being shamed in front of others, which is good advice, but Jesus is sharing with them something more than just good etiquette.

He adds to his admonition:

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He isn't talking about just the immediate situation where someone could set himself up for being profoundly humbled in front of others. And he isn't giving them a strategy for how to end up with a seat of honor by pretending to be humble. He's giving them a preview of God's kingdom. He has been preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God since his ministry began, so his admonition is also a reference to something eschatological.....the end times.....letting them know what will happen when the kingdom does come.....something that will happen when everyone will be before the heavenly table.

But not everyone is at this table in the Pharisee's house preparing for the Sabbath meal. There are only the select few who have been specially invited, so Jesus takes the Pharisee aside and gives him some additional inside advice. Like many of us, the Pharisee has asked his friends to share this meal with him.....the people that he hangs out with.....the people who probably invite him over to their house for

a meal as well. But Jesus says to him, “Don’t invite your friends and your relatives and your rich neighbors when you give a luncheon or a dinner in case they may invite you in return and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

What Jesus is describing is radical hospitality. He is turning the tables on us. He is challenging our own social conventions as well as the ones of the Pharisees and his friends. We heard in the passage this morning from Hebrews the warning not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. We are reminded of Abraham and Sarah and the three visitors who enjoyed their hospitality under the trees at Mamre and who delivered God’s message to them that Sarah would bear a child in her old age. We just never know when we offer hospitality to strangers what surprises may be offered to us in the bargain. It’s actually somewhat of a temptation to know that there might be a nice surprise waiting for us when we are hospitable. It has probably happened to many of us.....that nice feeling we have of having been blessed by someone that we didn’t know.

When Jesus asks us to offer radical hospitality to complete strangers, surely he must know that he is asking us to stick our necks out. He is asking us to take risks in what he must know is a dangerous world. He is asking us to do something that is out of the realm of normal socializing for us. He is asking us to do things that inherently go against the grain. He is asking us to be vulnerable. He is asking us to put ourselves out there without expecting anything in return.....and to put ourselves in situations that make us nervous and perhaps uncomfortable and sometimes leave us feeling anxious. This same passage in Hebrews that we just heard also encourages us to remember those in prison as if we ourselves were in prison and those who are being tortured as though we ourselves were being tortured. There is the mandate here for us to walk in another’s shoes.....to put on their skin and to feel their pain. This is radical hospitality. It’s a tall order, but one that we can manage when we ask for God’s support.

I’m reminded of the picnic we had last summer for the homeless with St. Patrick’s and St. Alban’s and St. John’s. We didn’t have as many guests as we would have liked, but we extended ourselves fully knowing that those we had invited wouldn’t be able to invite us back. We invited them to our table in our parking lot so that we could feed them. And we involved retailers in the community as well.....local merchants who cheerfully supplied food and drink and paper products.....to lend their support not only to the homeless, but to those who were seeking to serve them. It was a perfectly glorious summer day.....bright sunshine and a few puffy clouds and a gentle breeze blowing that lifted the aromas of fabulous food in the air. As our guests sat in lawn chairs in the shade and enjoyed the food that had been prepared for them, I heard a number of conversations going on between parishioners and our guests. Stories were being told and stories were being heard. Having a willing ear to listen to the stories of our life is the kind of thing that nourishes the soul. And I heard parishioners inviting our guests to come and worship with us. It seemed, at that level, that the picnic was a great success. If only one person walked away feeling that other people cared, it was worth all the effort. It was exactly the kind of radical hospitality that Jesus is talking to us about. And hopefully, each person who walked away nourished and satisfied had the sense of having encountered the living God.

Jesus knows that this is a dangerous world. Jesus himself lived in a dangerous world. He knows what we’re up against. And still he asks us to stick our necks out. Sometimes that means something like the picnic for the homeless. At other times, it might be taking the time to listen to a visitor here.....to overcome our own tendency to ‘hang together’ because it’s comfortable. Sometimes it’s learning a new

name and listening to a new story. It's introducing someone to someone else. It's learning a bit of information that we can refer to the next time we see them. It's about extending ourselves in engagement with people that we don't yet know. That's not always so easy. We have our own anxieties and discomforts about doing that. We have our own feelings of awkwardness when we try to engage with another. It doesn't always run smoothly. And it's so much more comfortable and satisfying to us to spend our time with people that we already know.

But we need always to remember that radical hospitality is God's mandate to us. This is what we are charged with doing as Jesus' followers. When we decide that we are disciples of Christ, rather than simply followers of Christ we need to make decisions about this mandate. Do we feel obligated to act on his commands or are we content just to hear them and to know what they are? Sometimes it's hard to even figure out which way to go. Sometimes it's hard to figure out just what to do. Sometimes it's overwhelming to consider the extent of the need that's just beyond our doors. But it's important to figure it out and it's important to try and it's important to act.

Remember that Jesus never abandons us to face our fears alone. Jesus is able to find a way when there is no way. All of his ministry validates those two statements. The passage from Hebrews this morning reminds us that Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever. He was the same when that scripture was written.....and before.....and he is the same today. He doesn't change and he's not going anywhere. All we need to do is to make up our minds that we want to be more than followers; we want to be disciples. Jesus will provide us with whatever it is we need.....spiritually or emotionally or physically.....to do just that. We are the body of Christ in Bailey's Crossroads. We are the hands and feet and the eyes and ears of Christ. In his name and with his power, we can do all things. All we need to do is ask. All it takes is a willingness on our part.....a sincere and open-hearted willingness. All it takes is for us to want to put the generosity in our hearts to the best use of the community that we serve. We've done it before and we can keep doing it as we discover opportunities to serve.

We need only to prepare ourselves, to pray for what we need and to listen for God's call to St. Paul's. When we hear that call, we need to be prepared to answer it.

And we need to remember that through Him, all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.