

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.28.16
Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Did you know that the Greek original rendered in English as “hospitality” is *philoxena*? That is literally “love of the strange.”

Hear it in contrast to xenophobia—fear or hatred of the strange, fear or hatred of the other or of outsiders.

It’s been noted that xenophobia is on the rise—that it was xenophobia at work behind the Brexit vote, that it is xenophobia at least in part at work in Donald Trump’s popularity. Any period that brings with it tremendous change is vulnerable to a spirit of xenophobia, and certainly we of the United States, we of the world, are in a period of tremendous change—change in demographics, change in the labor market and the economy, change in the earth’s climate, change in our most basic experiences of life in the world due to the internet and technology. The winds of change aren’t merely blowing; they’re howling.

I have a Facebook friend who regularly posts news stories about terrorist attacks in Syria and ISIS controlled areas. You might think she means to bring to the consciousness of her friends the terrible circumstances amidst which many people of the world try to make lives for themselves. You might think her aim is empathy. So that’s how I’ve decided to take them.

But that doesn’t match her intent. She does this to stoke xenophobia: “See? This is what *those* people are like, which is why we need to keep them far from our shores.”

Hospitality will have none of that.

It would be easy to assume Jesus was spelling out some rules of hospitality here. At this decorous Sabbath celebration, at the home at the leader of the Pharisees, Jesus, it might seem, was taking this opportunity to spell out some guidelines for proper hospitality—where to sit, whom to invite to your dinner parties and why. But a closer look suggests he’s testing *their* hospitality. He was, after all, being very strange.

Not that this was atypical. Jesus is remembered to have often been strange—to have defied expectations and upset conventions, to have called into question even the most established points of the Law.

Less crucially, neither was it atypical that Jesus was attending a meal. Luke's gospel does, after all, remember Jesus often at someone's house for meal. Really, as Luke tells it, Jesus was either always on his way to eat, was eating, or was just leaving the table—and yet never as the host but always as the guest, the visitor just passing through, the stranger stopped in to be entertained.

But at this particular meal, his conversation was unusually provocative, unusually pointed—and perhaps because “they were watching him closely,” which the story notes.

“They,” I suppose, were the Pharisees and the lawyers who are mentioned in the verses we didn't hear—though as to why they were watching him closely, we can only guess. Maybe they were eager to see him defy some law or convention so they could condemn him. Maybe they were eager to see him defy some law or convention so they could feel the satisfaction of being scandalized—“Shocked. Shocked!” Or maybe they were watchful that it wouldn't come to that, that it wouldn't *necessarily* come to that; watchful and hopeful that someone could save the world without upsetting anything or disrupting anything, that someone could come in radical power and compassion but wouldn't actually cut to the foundation of things as they are.

I mean, can't we have God's truth among us without some attendant admission that all is not entirely well?

Can't we have God manifest among us without also a deep recognition that the powers-that-be are less than ideal, less than good, perhaps even thoroughly corrupt, to some exploitive and dangerous—to the underdogs and scapegoats and society's cast-offs?

Can't we have God's wisdom and good judgment at work in our lives without having to let go the things that fall woefully short, even if they're good enough for some of us?

Because that's what I want: I want life as I know it and God's kingdom come, I want my comfortable surroundings but also something radically good. I want equality for all people, but I hesitate to surrender my privilege. I want equal access for all people, but I really my kids to get into that exclusive university.

Can't I have both?

Maybe “they” were watching Jesus closely because they were hoping to see that they could have it both ways, that *we* could have it both ways: both the familiar and the good, both the conventional and the transformative. “Upset things, Jesus,” we might as well pray, “just not too much, just not the things that make my life comfy and secure.”

Two weeks ago, if we'd not done Godly Play in worship, we'd have remembered Jesus saying, "My coming won't bring peace but division; my coming won't bring peace but the sword." Maybe "they" were watching him closely because they were hoping he'd overstated that just a bit.

He hadn't. He didn't. Consider his small talk at table—divisive indeed. Having noticed how the guests chose for themselves places of honor at the table, he had this to say: "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." And, yes, this isn't a wedding banquet. But his comment does come into the room a little too closely. Have you chosen the right seat for yourself? What about you? Are you really as important as is the next person who might walk in? And shouldn't you—shouldn't we all—just be grateful and joyful at being invited in the first place?

My seat in the boat is always seat three. That's the third seat from the bow, and I was there all through my rowing career in high school. I'm back there now, in all of the four eights I rowed in last week at Masters' Nationals. Over dinner one night, I was immersed in a conversation about the particular role that each seat plays in a boat's setup. The woman beside me, who rowed in the 1984 Olympics, explained that everyone knows 3rd seat is for the least nuanced rower. The one who sits in the 3rd seat she said (not knowing my usual position) is known as the "three-tard," a play on a word that's as nasty as they come. It stung me when she said it, and I nursed that sting for few minutes. (Okay, a few hours.) Then I decided, that I'm rowing at all is what matters to me. Further, I thought of other people who might have been called this nasty word, and I figured that's pretty good company to keep.

Jesus wasn't content, though, with his discourse on a party's guests. Now he would move onto the host, saying, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, so that they might 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, no, this isn't a luncheon that the host has thrown, but it is a dinner, the Sabbath dinner, which is similar but even more honorable than a plain old luncheon. So, either the host has failed to live out Jesus' instruction or he's succeeded at this, and the guests should know themselves to be the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind—those unable to

repay the host for what he's given them. So, which was it? Was the host wrong-headed or are the guests society's losers?

The third portion of his party-talk we didn't hear, but it might well be familiar to you because we often hear Matthew's version of this. It will also be memorable because it's the most peculiar of all, featuring a host who invited many people to an upcoming, but not apparently scheduled, dinner party. The would-be guests, it seems, responded that they would come, but when the dinner was at last ready and the slave was sent out to tell the people that now was the time, they each had had other things come up. One said, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies," while another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies," and still another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come"—all valid excuses for their having now to refuse the invitation.

Consider: these would-be guests were important people in society, and their conflicts are proof of that. These weren't "I changed my mind, I don't like the others invited, I have to wash my hair" kind of excuses. These were people living up to their responsibilities: rather than going to a dinner party they were doing what they ought to do in order to keep society going. In fact, you could argue that the fault of the stalled-out dinner party falls on the host, who kept everyone guessing as to when it would be until he announced, "Everything is ready *now*."

So out goes the slave to round up a second-string group of guests—the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. And, lo and behold, they're free to come just now. But why wouldn't they be, for they have nothing else to do! They're the ones who stand on street corners and sit on stoops waiting for something to happen—for work to find them, or for help to come, or for a passer-by to take some interest and start up a conversation. They're the ones who wait for life to find them rather than who have the wherewithal to go out and make their lives happen. And yet they're the ones who will taste the great host's dinner.

See? These stories and statements are a little sketchy, maybe even offensive—none in accordance with polite society and proper observance of the Sabbath. Jesus was showing exactly no appreciation for social expectation and propriety. It's a wonder the host and other guests tolerated his strange behavior as well as they apparently did, or really at all.

It's a wonder, really.

The challenge of hospitality is more than just making sure the sheets are clean in the guest room. Bible scholar Erik Heen recognizes this in the then surprising exhortation of the writer of Hebrews to the Christian community—this which we used as a Call to Worship, this which exhorted them to practice hospitality. This community was, after all, as he notes, “beleaguered, suffering, and vulnerable.” The people addressed in it had suffered years of occupation and war, had suffered loss of their city and homeland, the loss of their Temple and their religious practice by which they might have felt themselves a people at all. They’d lost everything. And so Mr. Heen finds it “astounding that this community—one that had experienced the *loss* of property—is asked to open itself up as a patron to strangers.”

But then he considers it from another angle: “Many ancients were locked into lives of routine and did not stray far from their places of birth. Life was difficult and mobility was limited. So, hospitality was provided, then, by those who had ‘love of the strange,’ by those who were curious about the wider world... [And in this] was a kind of marvelous exchange...of mutual benefit between host and guest. The guest received food, company, and protection (inns were dangerous places) while hosts were led out of themselves and their ‘little’ worlds...”

I was eight years old when the Samuluks moved as refugees from Laos to North Hampton, New Hampshire, the small town where I would live for my first 18 years. There were ten in their family of three generations—Pang the oldest (in her 60s, though she looked much older), Somran the youngest (still in diapers). Boakhai was, though a little older than I, placed in the 3rd grade, Mrs. Burbine’s class. Her desk was next to mine. We became friends. Our families became friendly. My mom began her journey back into teaching by tutoring all the school-aged children in English every day after school—Prasane, Presith, Boakhai, Somchai, and Villaypon. At their house, when I would sleep over, I’d do so on a mat on the floor. I’d eat noodles with chopsticks and I wouldn’t eat those notoriously hot peppers. I’d brush my teeth in a manner that Boahkai always laughed at and found sort of gross, foaming at the mouth as I’d be. And Pang would always rub my earlobes because, big as they are, they reminded her of the Buddha. “Number 1,” she would say as she did so, as in, “This is best!” the only English she ever learned.

Eventually, the friendship faded. Boakhai was older than I was after all, and she’d been wearing cast-off clothes for years, some of which had been mine. (Though older, she was

also smaller than I.) And you can only handle being a charity-case-friend for so long. But in the intervening years I think we've all come to trust that the mutual benefit of our long-ago friendship was stronger than we might have realized at the time it had faded.

We're friends on Facebook.

Pang died a while ago, and her grown children's posts about that featured pictures of them in orange robes. I don't know the significance of those robes. I'm comfortable not knowing, though I'd be open to hearing about it should it ever come up.

I can't help but to think we're missing out on some deeply humanizing opportunities in our country's turning a deaf ear to the plight of the world's refugees. There's blessing in making connections where you'd otherwise never be able to make them, where you'd never even imagine making them. But there's also blessing in not making connections, in feeling thoroughly mystified by the way someone else is, maybe even annoyed, maybe even stung. It's arrogant folly to think everyone will always make sense to us, that everyone we ever meet will come around to our way of being. The blessing is this: that it's a foretaste of what the kingdom of God will feel like, that it's practice for when we most truly and absolutely encounter Christ.

Christ is our brother and friend; Christ is also the stranger in our midst, the one who simply cannot conform to our norms and practices, the one whose very promise and presence in the world is an indictment, a disruption, a calling into question our assumptions and a turning on its head our hierarchy of value. Preacher Frederick Beuchner admits to feeling annoyed by people who seem to think they have the Lord in their back pocket, ready at all times to affirm and approve. Tobias admits to hating the Christian pop music his bus driver always has blaring, the "Jesus is my boyfriend" songs that make of the love of Christ akin to easy listening. I'll admit to both. Jesus is just that familiar, but only if he is also almost intolerably strange.

The people at that storied Sabbath gathering seemed to tolerate such gracious and radical disruption without comment. The question is whether they were transformed by it—and a more pressing one is whether we were, whether we are.

What's it like to be discomforted by the one whom we also know as comforter? I have to admit, I sort of like it.

Thanks be to God.