

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 9.1.19

### **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 for ever. 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.<sup>7</sup> When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.<sup>8</sup> "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;<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.<sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (268)

Did you know that the Greek original rendered in English as "hospitality" is *philoxena*? That is literally "love of the strange." If you did know, it might be from me that you heard it. I've mentioned it before. It seems relevant to the project that is Christianity, hospitality being one of its chief professed values.

Hospitality: love of the strange.

Hear it thus: "Do not neglect to show to the stranger your love of the strange. Do not neglect to show the stranger in your midst how you love what makes him strange, what makes her strange to you." It's not a bug, this strangeness; it's a feature (in the parlance of the computer age).

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

I mention it now because the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews mentioned it in this which is neither a letter nor necessarily to the Hebrews, this which is more of a sermon and to whom we don't know and from whom we don't know but for the purpose (this we *do* know) of the people not drifting away from their faith.

That was the *why* of this letter/sermon in the first place: that those hearing not drift away from the original message they'd heard, the long ago message of God who spoke (the world into being, the people into being).

Drifting away from it: it seems a surprisingly un-urgent phenomenon, but one we might relate to. I imagine we all know people, and moreover love people, who've drifted away from this thing that we regard as worthy of our attention, worthy even of our conviction, this life of faith and practice that, once you begin to drift away from it, you might realize, "This is fine. I can do this." The world can make sense without transcendence, without a beginning and an end and a narrative shape in the meantime, without an alpha and omega—as long as you don't think about it too hard.

If this concern, though, seems mild (this drifting away, whose image might be a down feather on a breeze or a raft on a lazy river) it's the only thing in this letter (which is more of a sermon) that is mild. Otherwise, our writer is convicted in what he has to say about the "Christ event"—how he understands its effect and purpose and significance.

Christ is the fulfillment of the proto-types found in Moses and the prophets. Christ is effective as a priest before the altar, surpassing even the efficacy of the Levitical priests who filled the previous millennium with effective sacrifice and worship. Christ is the saving sacrifice that is final, so absolutely does it accomplish the goal of atonement for all humanity. King and God and sacrifice, as the Christmas carol puts it; king and priest and sacrifice, as the three gifts of the Magi to the infant Christ suggest it: this letter/sermon is heavy as velvet drapery when it comes to Christology.

I have to tell you, this is not a book I particularly like. I don't preach on it often; I only read it under duress (like this week). It invites a supersessionist reading that has proven harmful in history: that what Jewish practice attempted to do, Christ succeeded in doing. Its concern for the sacrifice that Jesus made overrides the miracle of the resurrection that God made—big into the blood of Christ, much less so into the yet living of Christ. It's very tidy, this book and the thinking

behind it, but not very inviting. And I'm not alone in my disaffection for it. Lots of people, even from the earliest centuries of the faith, have questioned its belonging in the biblical canon.

That said, it does have a few gems, many of which I think are found in this final chapter, what's often called the "concluding admonitions" or "final exhortations." They read as a sort-of grab-all list, even a "fake-it-'til-you make-it" list of what to do in case you find yourself indeed drifting away from the faith and heavy-as-velvet-drapery Christological sermonizing doesn't marshal you back into the fold. Let mutual love continue. Honor your marriage vows. Remember those in prison and even those being tortured; remember them as if it might be you. Don't live your life in pursuit of money. Do good. Share. And do not neglect to show love of the strange to those who are strangers in your midst.

Jesus seems to be testing the bounds of this—Jesus, at table. He was there a lot, as it happens, according to Luke. In this gospel narrative, Jesus is remembered as either heading off to eat, eating, or coming from having eaten. What's more, he was always at these gatherings around food as a guest; he was never host. (That is, not until as he will for us in just a little while.) And there's often a relationship to be found between all the readings of the lectionary on any given Sunday, and if this week the common theme is hospitality, then we might have assumed that Jesus' teaching while at this decorous Sabbath celebration was all about hospitality. After all, where more apropos a place than at a formal dinner to consider matters of hospitality?

And there is that. What Jesus had to say as party chatter has to do with social graces, social striving, who's welcome and who's not. A wedding banquet. A luncheon or dinner. The parables are straightforward, unlike many parables. These are, if provocative, hardly puzzling.

In the first, he insinuates that he's aware of the striving that can take place at banquets, and he encourages a reversal of that striving: "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... But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This recalls an old theme in this book. The world will be turned upside down, according to Luke. With Jesus, the world would be turned upside down. It's a thing we first hear from Mary when, pregnant with Jesus, goes to her cousin Elizabeth's and sings a song reminiscent of Hannah's song when she was pregnant with Samuel: The LORD "...has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and

lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” It’s a concern continued to be voiced with the news of the coming of the Messiah into the world first revealed to some shepherds living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. That’s Luke, and here he continues in the theme, that there will be a grand shifting of place as regards proximity to power. So beware, those whose striving lands them in plumb places: it might be temporary. Everything is, except the things that abide (faith, hope, and love).

In the second parable, he insinuates that he’s aware of how transactional relationships can become: ““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.” And he encourages the liberation that inheres in relationships founded not on transaction but on hospitality, an openness to the strangeness of others, a perhaps even delight at the strangeness of others. Those who can *do* nothing for you, can neither you not burnish your image your raise your social standing: these can then become people whose simple existence is what pleases, even delights. And once you make this discovery about those who can’t do anything for you, you might make this discovery about those who can.

I remember once, in graduate school the first time around, when I was far from home if not geographically than certainly culturally, in Southern Illinois studying for a master’s degree in creative writing, the one other student my age had a laser printer. All I had was a dot-matrix printer and those took forever to print anything out. Worse, though, was the fact that I was painfully lonely there in Southern Illinois. It was such a mistake to go there after college.

I used to go to this girl’s apartment to use her laser printer for the very regular printing we had to do in submitting story after story for workshop.

Once, she expressed her growing resentment about this. “You’re using me for my printer,” she said, and I was too ashamed to correct her: “No, I’m using your printer for you.” As I remember it, I just wanted to be close with someone—an urge that has, in remembering it, always left me feeling a little sorry for those who find themselves in a position of status, the rich, the famous, the influential. I wonder if they go around thinking people are seeking relationship with them for some transactional purpose rather than because they might enjoy them as friends, plain and simple.

It would be a dreadful state to live in, to feel the best thing about you is your money, your fame, your laser printer; that this is the sum total of what people find appealing about you. And maybe it is. Bummer.

But the topic of hospitality wasn't only text in what Jesus had to say at this Sabbath dinner; it was also subtext. These stories were slightly ill fitting for the occasion, perhaps more provocative for the context in which he told them than they'd seem on their own terms. If Jesus had told these stories while walking along with his disciples, they'd land safer, more easily. So it's the *setting* that makes these especially provocative—as if too calling out of what was going on the room. There wasn't that comfortable distance between what we're talking about and what we're doing; instead our talking becomes in a real, sometimes risky, almost dangerous way what we're doing.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone whose seems to be doing something in their talk? I'm reading a book, *Home*, by Marilynne Robinson, in which one of the characters, Jack, seems always to be doing something in his talk, as if there's a collapse in what he talks about with others into how he is with others. It makes him the cause of suspicion to other characters. In fact, in the first book in which he's featured, *Gilead*, he's almost incomprehensibly bad. Why can't he ever just speak some plain text?" I wondered among friends who'd also read it. "Why does even his saying hello feel like it's insinuating something else, something nefarious?"

But there's been a funny transition as regards Jack over the two books, *Gilead* and now *Home*. If at first he seemed like seemed as Cain in the Bible, destined to wander the world under the weight of a curse, never to be trusted, never to settle down and do anything good, there was eventually a glimmer of Jacob, also in the Bible, someone who steals others' identities and is really just in need of someone to fight him, wrestle him as if to help him com to terms with his aggression and destructive drives, which we've all got but which were never really allowed expression in this very pious preacher's family. (Robinson herself is the daughter of a preacher-father; she's also a member of the UCC, the congregation in Iowa City.)

But there's lately been a turn; Jack has lately seemed less cursed, or mixed, and more seemed as Christ. Everything he says suggests something deeper, and it's becoming clear that there is a zeal for justice at the heart of it all.

Moreover, everyone is always watching him. His sister even described it once: “Poor Jack. People watched him, and he knew it. It was partly distrust. But more than that, the man was at once indecipherable and transparent. Of course they watched him.”

I read that this week, and then I read the scripture passages for this week: “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.”

Both are up to something.

What are they up to?

The parables Jesus told came altogether too close into the room—because, though this wasn’t a wedding banquet that drew this gathering together, it was but a Sabbath dinner, which is similar. So these guests, these striving guests, of whom Jesus spoke, who overestimated their social worth as guests, who sidled up to the seat of power as if they were worthy of such place: was he suggesting any of them?

And, no, this wasn’t a luncheon, but it was a dinner, so either the host has failed to live out Jesus’ instruction to invite not those who could repay him for what he’s done for them, instead to invite those who can’t, which is to say poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind: either the host has failed to do this, in which case now they must sit through dinner with this judgment hanging in the air, 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 in error or are the guests lame?

Jesus was really testing the limits, don’t you think? The limits of his hosts’ hospitality, the limits of his fellow guests love of the strange in their midst.

It makes you wonder of that was his aim, if that was the point.

One error I see at work in a lot of Christian practice is the move to make Jesus meek and mild, as our best friend or even our boyfriend. Preacher Frederick Buechner speaks of people who seem to have the Lord Jesus Christ in their back pocket. Jesus will tell them what socks to wear in the morning, what to order off the menu for lunch, what music to listen to when going for a run. And I’m all for being guided by the Spirit in life. But that expectation that Jesus will always be a reliable member of your squad, a helpful and cooperative source of support, doesn’t track with how the gospels actually depict him. Jesus was *not* supportive. He was *difficult*. He was not one to

go along to get along. “You go, girl,” is not something he ever said. What he did say is, “Take up your cross and follow me.” That’s different.

Another error I see at work in a lot of Christian practice, an error that comes closer to home, often found in mainline churches, is the reliance on control. And it’s tricky, I grant you. As participants in the life of a congregation, we should want our gatherings to be safe and well managed, to be orderly. These are formal occasions, worship is, religious celebration is; they follow a form, by which paradoxically there can come freedom. Freedom, of the sort God wills, requires form, otherwise courts chaos or exploitation. Really, whenever power is at play, leadership and form are crucial. But control is something else. An urge of the ego, it forecloses on surprise, which is often the mode of Holy Spirit. It forecloses on the strange showing up and finding place.

A controlling way can foreclose on true hospitality—that love of the strange.

Jesus will not meet our expectations, and will not submit to our control. Jesus will not bless our ordering of things in society and will not ordain what we have decided is good, or at least good enough. Jesus isn’t going to be nearly so easy on us. He’s always pushing the boundary of what we have settled for.

If this is troubling to you, here’s though some good news: whether Jesus is welcome at our table, we are welcome at his. From there, we can fake it ‘til we make it.

Thanks be to God.