

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, August 29, 2010.

Proper 17, Year C [Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#) [Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

Let's go early to get a good seat. I'm getting reserved seats for the concert. Come sit next to me.

Knowing where to sit seems to be really important to us. In most every home, each family member has his/her own designated seat at the dinner table. In large families or at holiday gatherings, there is often a separate children's table, and it is a rite of passage to move from the kids' table to a seat at the adult table for Thanksgiving dinner. I have a friend who is helping her daughter with wedding arrangements, and the seating for the reception dinner has become a tremendous project. We Episcopalians, we St. Luke's folk who tend to gravitate to the same seat in this place on Sunday morning, may be seeing ourselves a little here. There are many stories that float around about church services where someone is irritated because another person sits in their regular seat. There is even one story, which I hope is an exaggeration, where a long-time member of a congregation is reported to have said to a visitor, "I understand you are new here, and we welcome you. But could you move; you're in our pew."

So why does Jesus care who sits where when he dines at the home of the leader of the Pharisees? Luke writes that Jesus is being watched by the Pharisees as they try to catch him breaking the laws. But, Luke also says, Jesus is watching them and apparently quite closely. He sees how they all rush for the good seats, the places of honor. And he seizes the opportunity to share his message. He tells them that it is better to seek a seat at a lower table so that they can keep their seat, maybe even be invited to move up, but they won't be embarrassed when someone more distinguished arrives at the dinner, and they are asked to move from their seat.

With these instructions to his Pharisee host and the others gathered at his table, Jesus has turned their value system on its ear. He is telling these important people who are used to sitting in seats of honor that there is no honor and privilege in having everything done for you but rather it lies in a willingness to assume the role of a servant who is more concerned about others than his or her own comfort. The word we use for this is *humility*.

It's a funny thing about humility – it's really a paradox --- Jesus tells us to humble ourselves, yet if one actually TRIES being humble, it's not true humility. So what are we to do – slip around, watching for the chance and then suddenly become humble??? We can't say to our spouse, "Honey, do these jeans make me look humble?" or "Hey, friend, was I humble just a minute ago? Did you see it?" All athletes, musicians, actors, parents, teachers, craftsmen, and coaches know that the way you improve your skills is to practice. So, how do we get better at humility?

Jesus's words, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." are not just a nice idea. They are words that describe Jesus' own life. St. Bernard said, "Jesus is the ultimate definition of humility." When we approach life as Jesus would have us do, not simply concerned with our own reputation and self-advancement, but conscious of others, something incredible happens. A shift takes place. We are no longer the center of our universe. We come to see ourselves as a part of the greater scheme of things, a part of God's creation, a child of God. We are right where we were meant to be: sitting side by side each other rather than over and above one another. Our regular seat is in a new place at the table.

Humility is the opposite of pride or arrogance. Pride is taking the gifts that God has given us and using those gifts to compare ourselves with others, elevating ourselves above them. At the heart of humility is a realization that all of our gifts come from God. All of our talents, all of our wealth, all of our skills and personality traits that allow us to advance in life. Humility is grounded in the deep awareness that everything that we are and everything that we have is totally a gift from God.

Jesus recommended, he urged, the Pharisees to turn their world upside down. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” This was a radical idea to them. But we have heard it before. We know of other places in Scripture, where Jesus preached similar radical, earth-shaking messages. Both in Mark’s Gospel and in Matthew’s, Jesus says, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” It might be tempting to take these passages about humility and vie for the lowest positions, to be the most humble person around and proud of it. Not at all, I think, what Jesus had in mind. So I ask, how. How do I do this? How can I show humility? How can I be last when everything around me tells me to claw, drag, push, shove, work, strive my way into first place, to the top of the ladder, to the Final 4, to the head of the company? The challenge for Christians is how to live in grace, knowing we are acceptable to God as we are, while at the same time, knowing that to live in the Spirit’s presence is to experience the ongoing need to go deeper, to love more, to give more of ourselves.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we get some practical suggestions. The writer says, among other things, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” And “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” If I can boil it down even more, we get “show hospitality; share what you have”. Hospitality – that’s a word we know and can grab hold of. Hospitality – being friendly and helpful to other people; sharing meals or coffee after church; inviting someone to come to church. It sounds simple, but true hospitality is humility in action. Hospitality is something we work on a lot at St. Luke’s. But in this community, right smack on an interstate highway, we have to do just that – *work* at it. It’s easy to be hospitable to people we agree with, people we understand, people who can pay us back. Just like it’s easy to be at peace with our friends or allies. It’s harder to do so with strangers who don’t look or dress like us or who think differently from us, yet those are the very people Jesus told the Pharisees to extend their hospitality to. Oh dear, that means we have to leave our comfortable, regular seats and move to new ones, probably sitting next to some one very different.

I keep coming back to the question of “how”. How do we practice hospitality as an individual, as a church, and as a nation? Who is the stranger you’ll meet this week, the person with whom you differ, who you’ll be called to welcome? Who is God sending into your life to help you grow in this way – in your office, in your neighborhood, in your classroom, in your regular seat? I want the instructions; I want the rule book; I want the “Humility and Hospitality for Dummies” handbook. But wait, we have it. We have the “how to” guide. We have the Gospel. We have our Baptismal covenant. We have the examples of the company of saints before us.

In the second part of our Gospel reading, Luke says that Jesus had words not only for his current host but for anyone who planned to be a host in the future: “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” What a crazy idea! Whoever heard of such a way to host a dinner party? Jesus says hospitality is to be extended to those with no way of paying it back. Can you think of a time when you have done that? Can you think of a time when someone has done that for you? Think of when you have received a gift – an invitation to dinner, a card, a hug, a compliment – from someone you know you can never repay. It’s rare, but when

it happens, it provides a vision of God's unconditional love, a glimmer of grace. Many years ago when my father was dying, my mother spent every night for 6 weeks in his hospital room. So that she would not be at the hospital alone, a group of my father's friends organized themselves, and each night, one of them slept on the plastic sofa in the waiting room just down the hall. Then they would get up in the morning and go to work. There is no way I could ever repay that gift --- and they never expected me to – but it was one of the greatest gifts I ever received.

Long-time St. Luker's know how much Jim Craven loves baseball, and some folks have come to expect a reference to it in his sermons. They listen for the "B" word. Well, I have a "B" word too – Belize. I learned so much during my time at Holy Cross school last spring that you will be hearing examples from Belize for a long time. So – in little San Mateo, the small community served by Holy Cross school, one of the five poorest communities in Central America, I encountered amazing humility and hospitality. People who could barely put enough food on the table for their families wanted me to come and share a meal with them – they were so willing and so happy to share the little bit they had. Last week the youth talked about small gifts they were given by the children in the school. I came home with handmade necklaces, cards, music CDs, pictures, poems, carved wooden toucans – all given in love. No one expected or asked for anything in return.

How do we practice hospitality as a church? We have enriched our worship space to make it more inviting. Our grounds are becoming more beautiful each week and our campus easier to navigate. We have yummy snacks at coffee hour and name tags so we can greet each other by name. We are genuinely happy when someone new comes to visit and even more delighted when they return. Is this enough? Are we practicing the kind of hospitality Jesus taught about? St. Benedict, whose ancient rule helps shape my life, says the stranger is to be welcomed as Christ, and that Christ often comes well disguised. In Benedict's vision, a monastery would not exist without guests. The presence of guests indicated its vitality. If a monastery exercised enough hospitality to attract guests, it was functioning as a proper monastery. If it did not attract guests, it was not functioning as a monastery should. We could apply a similar test to the church and ask whether it is doing and being what it is called to do and be. What are we doing to open our doors to the world? In Benedict's vision, to reject the world is to reject other people. To reject other people is to reject Christ himself. Preaching hatred and exclusion, thinly veiled in the language of faith and honor, is not welcoming the stranger. It is not part of Benedict's vision or Jesus' teachings. Radical welcome, radical hospitality include all children of God.

Whenever we approach life with a heart willing to honor others, with a mind that searches creatively to care for those around us, with hands that seek out ways to be of use to the larger good, we are opening ourselves up to the blessings of humility. Whenever we reach out to bring hope and healing to others or to open our hearts to those whom others reject, we are welcoming the stranger. When we contribute to the Urban Ministries shelter, kitchen and food pantry, or to building a Habitat house, we are welcoming the stranger. When we pledge our support to the broad range of St Luke's outreach ministries, or for the institution of a living wage for all workers in this country, or for fair reform of immigration policies, we are welcoming the stranger. We are extending hospitality and the love of Christ to those who cannot repay us.

So take your seat. The banquet is about to begin. Are you in your regular, comfortable seat or have you moved to a new place at the table, a place where you can humbly and generously extend hospitality. Have you brought someone with you, someone who might not otherwise have been invited? Look to your left and to your right. Look closely; there is probably an angel sitting beside you.