

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

August 28, 2016; the 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14.

Places of Honor

Where we seat matters to us.

I always had basically the same seat when I was a student in classrooms.

In church, when I'm sitting in the pews, that is even more true.

I like to sit right about there. (pointing to the five pew from the front on the left facing the congregation)

Far enough back so that if I'm in a new church, as I might be when on vacation, I can figure out how they do communion by watching the people who go in front of me.

That doesn't always work of course...but it is my only chance to figure it out.

If you are new here today...don't worry, whatever you do, however you get up here for communion is fine...the best way for today.

As your hosts, we will assist and come to you.

Have you ever visited a church, and you sit where you want, and then someone comes up and tells you that you are in his or her seat?

This happens a lot more than we might imagine, apparently---as people tell me from time to time that it happened to them.

If you ever come into church here, and find someone new sitting where you normally sit, I hope you will say:

“Thank God you are here, sitting my seat; welcome!”

Cause you know that person is going to be an angel.

One of the things that I love, love, love about church...life

in community, is welcome newcomers, who really are angels in our midst--they bring so much, their energy, new ideas; and most importantly, through every life, we learn more about God.

Today's readings invite our consideration of how we are hospitable to others, how we give them places of honor, and how we have a place of honor by God's side.

And what difference does all this make for God, our world, for us?

How are we called to offer hospitality?

How are we called to view our own place in this world?

Always remembering that Jesus has turned the world upside down, the ways of the the world, when it comes to what is valued and who is valued.

One of my favorite passages of scripture is the one we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

There are places in scripture where people were surprised by what they determined to be angels...in connection to showing hospitality, we think of Abraham and Sarah who showed hospitality to three strangers who turned out to be angels sent by God to tell them that Sarah would have a son.

She laughed when she heard this because she was very old. (Genesis 18)

Hospitality can be an occasion for new revelation as strangers become friends.

When we show hospitality to others, we also become angels for them.

Hospitality is one ways that the Spirit is made

known among us...in a power way, for both the one being welcomed and the one doing the welcoming.

In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen states: “Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”¹

Given all of the divisions in our nation and in the world
right now, I find that to be a beautiful and hopeful
definition of hospitality.

Every time that Jesus was offered hospitality, he shared
himself, his message, in ways that surprised,
challenged, educated, and comforted.

Consider our Gospel account for today.
Jesus is shown hospitality by a Pharisee, a leader in
society, who invites Jesus to have a meal at his
home.

Would this Pharisee have invited Jesus if he had known
what was going to happen?
Inviting Jesus into our homes, our hearts, is also at some
level about inviting the unknown into our lives.

Knowing that God loves us and is for us enables us to
know that it is all going to work in the end.
But getting us there, sometimes God has to bring us
along...surprise us, challenge us.
It is said that if God hates all the same people you hate
than you have made God into your image...we could
also say if God believes all the same things we
believe, we have made God into our own
image.

God will not be domesticated, and God will surprise us.
We may even be surprised to find God right in the middle
of our lives when things are difficult.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1975, p. 55.

We might be surprised to find God, the Spirit, Jesus, right
in the middle of our lives when things are good.

Jesus was always a surprise to those around him, and on
this night he surprised people by doing another
healing on the Sabbath, those verses were
omitted in our reading, but that happens right before he starts to
offer wisdom about places of honor.

It is significant that he heals someone on the Sabbath
right before he teaches about places of honor,
because as we discussed
last week, healing on the Sabbath for Jesus and
the person is about freedom...really
embodies the gift of the Sabbath...and shows that
freedom can come in ways that are not in keeping
with the norms of the society.

So much of what we strive for in life is about finding
freedom, security.

But we can have all the material things of the world and
still not be free, or even feel free.

God offers freedom to us today, right now.

Jesus is addressing those who think they have life all
worked out...they know where to sit at this dinner
based on their social rank.

Jesus quotes Proverbs to them, Prov. 25:6-7, "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."

Jesus is teaching about hospitality and humility; we get
the well-known saying,

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those
who humble themselves will be exalted."

But it also sounds like he is just helping them to work with
the system in a smart way.

He is giving them sound advice based on a Proverb they
should know.

But then he turns the key a bit more unlocking the door,
the door to true freedom.

To the host Jesus says, and to all of us as host, do not
invite your friends or relatives, who can pay you back
or grant you favors, but “invite the poor, the
crippled, the lame and the blind.

And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you,
for you will be paid at the resurrection of the
righteous.”

Showing hospitality to others is a gift to them but, as we
experience after we help someone, or feed someone,
or welcome a person who everyone else looks
down on, we are blessed.

We are participating in the reign of God now on earth,
making it visible, and claiming that reality as the most
important and the most real, and we are blessed.

We have come to church today to claim the promises of
God; to walk in love; to walk in love with Jesus.

We come to church not to be seen or admired by others;
in fact, from time to time during my years of ministry,
people have told me that they are seen as odd
by their peers because they attend a church or
they feel like they don't fit in as well with the
same peer group.

The days are mostly gone when people attended church
in order to make business connections or because
their place in society made it necessary to attend
church.

And we are better for it.

Reminds me of the story I learned from a Russian history
professor at UVA...when religion could not be practiced publicly in Russia,
Christians would meet in secret, and there was a group meeting in a cave...soldiers
found them, brandishing their guns, there was no way out...but the soldiers said,
“we are here for the true Christians, the rest of you can go”...some left...and then the
soldiers put down their guns and said, “We needed to know who was truly
committed; we have come to join you.”

Talk about entertaining angels without knowing it.

God has invited us...the poor, the crippled, the lame, and
the blind to the table of fellowship with God through
Christ in the power of the Spirit...we know we cannot repay all that God
has given us.

But through God's hospitality with us, we are inspired to
strive for glory, strive for the kingdom, strive to be
those who welcome all strangers with great
hospitality.

As Henri Nouwen puts it:

"The great spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God that I can be free in the world--free to speak even when my words are not received; free to act even when my actions are criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless.... I am convinced that I will truly be able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its boundaries."²

We are welcomed by God with great love and excitement to God's table, to God's meal, where every seat is the best seat, the seat of honor.

Amen.

² <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/239822-reaching-out-the-three-movements-of-the-spiritual-life>