

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
September 2, 2007
Proper 17, 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Hebrews 13:1-8; Luke 14:1,7-14

I really think that we should have invited Ms. Manners or Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt to come and preach today. I'm sure they would love these lessons about hospitality, table manners, and place cards. But of course, Jesus has used a parable once again to tell us about much more than where to sit at a dinner party.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.”

In Leviticus 19:34, the Lord tells the children of Israel, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” This verse reminds us of those times that we have all experienced when we were the strangers. We have all been to those parties where we didn't know anyone, and so we just stood in the corner and stared off into space. We have been in those foreign countries or states or even neighborhoods where we didn't know the culture or the language or the laws of the residents. It doesn't feel good to be a stranger in a foreign place.

This week we've welcomed the children back to the Day School here at St. Margaret's. I can't believe it's already September 2, and the kids are once again catching the bus in front of my house. Many of you have been busy getting your kids prepared and buying all the right school supplies. I was at Office Depot this week, and in front of me was a kid buying his first combination lock. I immediately had a terrifying flashback to JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL!!! I remember standing at that long wall of lockers trying to figure out how to get that stupid thing unlocked. As we stood there we knew that the older 9th graders were walking by laughing at us. I had to remember all those numbers. And I didn't, I had to face the wrath of Mrs. Platt, who had been a 7th grade homeroom teacher for so long that she wouldn't assign our lockers until she had our combinations written down on her master list. She knew we would forget. We also knew that if we ever did finally get into our lockers, we would probably drop our books or sit at the wrong lunch table or not wear the right kind of shoes. It doesn't feel good to be in an unfamiliar atmosphere where you don't know anyone and don't have any friends and you don't fit in with the crowd.

And now we are all members of the Episcopal Church where sometimes we may feel like we're back in Junior High school. We have 15 different keys in our pockets to unlock 15 different doors in this church. We fear we'll sit in someone else's pew and not be able to find our place in the Book of Common Prayer which we drop when we try to find those stupid S numbers in the front of the Hymnal. That's if you have the right hymnal. (For your edification, the S stands for service music and those are found in the front of the blue hardback Hymnal 1982, not the green paperback one called Wonder, Love and Praise!)

Even in worship, it's hard to be in a new environment where you don't know the history and the tradition. We don't enjoy being strangers in a foreign place. We like to feel welcome. We like to feel at home. We like to be safe and secure.

The Old Testament is full of references to the importance of hospitality to the stranger. In Genesis 18, Abraham extends hospitality to three strangers and is greatly blessed. In the very next chapter, Lot extends hospitality to two messengers from God, and he and his family are spared in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In I Kings 17, the widow of Zeraphath offers hospitality to the prophet Elijah, and her supply of food miraculously lasts through the time of famine.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenos*. *Philoxenos* means to love the stranger (*philos*=love, *xenos*=stranger). So here the definition of hospitality is to show love for the

stranger. Jesus is both the stranger and the host offering hospitality. After Jesus “sets his face to go to Jerusalem” in chapter 9 of the Gospel of Luke, he is constantly on the road until he enters the Temple. Along the way he stops and stays with others, relying on their hospitality to a stranger who has often stirred up trouble with the officials and Pharisees. He is not always greeted warmly as we see when he is not welcomed in the first Samaritan village he tries to visit (Luke 9:52-56). Jesus remains the stranger, the one on the margins of society in need of the hospitality of others.

At the same time, Jesus is welcoming and extending hospitality to others around him. Jesus used table fellowship to show what the Kingdom of God should be like, and then he shared the table with “tax collectors and sinners.” Jesus taught us about loving the stranger, especially in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Love for the stranger is a form of love of neighbor. Throughout the Gospels, we see that hospitality was both something Jesus depended on for his own life and ministry as well as a vital part of who he was as God incarnate.

But how do we treat the stranger that comes into our midst? What do you do when a suspicious person seems to be walking closer to your car at a stoplight? Do you do what I do and kind of conspicuously move your elbow up and lock your door? Do you ease off of your brake as if to make a fast getaway if you are threatened? Do you walk faster down the sidewalk when you feel like someone is following you? Do you take off your collar or your nametag when you think somebody might ask you for something?

We live in a different world today where we do not trust our neighbors. We seem to act more out of hostility rather than hospitality. Henry Nouwen writes in his book *Reaching Out* that “Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm.” “But still,” he says, “that is our vocation: to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.”ⁱ

Hospitality is about more than simply putting people’s placecards at the right seat. Hospitality is about more than setting a fine table and having a casserole ready in the freezer. Hospitality is about attitude. The hospitality that Jesus taught is not a superfluous addendum to our beliefs, but rather a central tenant. Just as hospitality to the stranger was a part of who Jesus was, hospitality to the stranger is to be a part of who we are. Our acts of radical hospitality flow out of an attitude of love for the stranger.

We experience the radical hospitality of Jesus each time we come around this altar to celebrate the Eucharist. We are strangers when we come forward to the altar rail, sinful and broken people. But Jesus offers us the warm embrace of his ultimate act of hospitality, his death on the cross for our redemption. “Jesus is the true sacrifice in that he offers his whole life to God in . . . embracing the other. He gives himself to God fully, in trust and thanksgiving. . . . Life is given in hospitality for no reason beyond . . . embrace.”ⁱⁱ

As the ultimate host at the heavenly banquet, Jesus invites everyone to join hands around the table. He doesn’t just ask his friends to the party so that they will ask him to their house. He asks the poor who don’t care how much money was spent on the hors d’oeuvres; they only care that they taste good. He asks the crippled and the lame who don’t worry about which chair to choose; they just want to rest their legs. He asks the blind who don’t care what designer clothes you are wearing; they just want to hear the music. Jesus asks you, and he asks me.

Our etiquette class is finally over. The guest list includes all of us and many more. We have an invitation to a great party, and we should go, because wherever Jesus is, there is a great feast. And it doesn’t even matter where you sit, there’s room for everybody at the table. Come on, let’s go.

ⁱ Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching Out*. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1975, p.46.

ⁱⁱ Sedgwick, Timothy F. *The Christian Moral Life*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999, p.120.