

Pentecost 15, Proper 17
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

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The Problem in the Text

The readings from the Letter to the Hebrews and from St. Luke's Gospel have strong messages about hospitality from God's point of view. In the Letter, the writer implores us to "*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* What a beautiful way to live – to let love be a continuous, mutual action – to "love our neighbors as ourselves always" would be another way to say that. Better yet, treat the stranger as if they might be an angel, a messenger sent to us by God. But then, the writer gets even more radical with what God asks from us. Radical, Christ-like hospitality looks like this: *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.* THAT is a whole other level of hospitality – the kind of hospitality that breaks your heart open and leaves you vulnerable to mutual suffering. God asks us to have mutual love and mutual suffering. That is a lot to ask and it is hard to imagine as a way to live out our faith. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus "noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor..." because there is always the chance that you have taken a seat meant for someone else, someone held in higher esteem than you. I can imagine how embarrassing that would be. Jesus recommends, "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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Good party attending advice. But Jesus gets radical about hospitality when he tells the host that "when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Who gets a seat and who does not in the feast of the Kingdom of God? Jesus asks us to open our hearts and homes to others' suffering. Not just that but to actively *invite* them in. It sounds like a simple concept, but again, it is hard to imagine it in practice as a way to live out our faith.

The Problem in the World

Doesn't God know how complicated the world is? How dangerous the world is? How can He ask us to make ourselves vulnerable in a time when people get attacked by the mentally ill in horrible mass shootings? When the stranger may be an ISIS terrorist disguised as a refugee? There are stories in the news every day of innocent bystanders being hurt by strangers. I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that we are a world that lives in extreme fear. But then there comes into our collective consciousness those who are suffering. You may have seen the picture of the small Syrian boy, sitting in shock in an ambulance in Aleppo. His home had just suffered a brutal bombing by the government and Russian forces, which are actively targeting civilian locations in a brutal civil war. His name is Omran Daqneesh, he is five years old. He sits in silence, a small figure on an adult sized orange chair, too rattled to speak or even cry. His image immediately bookended in my mind with the three year old boy on the shore in turkey, Alan Kurdi, a tiny refugee who drowned after his boat capsized in the Mediterranean. One boy whose family stayed in Syria, the other whose family tried to escape. The two choices seem hopeless. As the West balances fear and sympathy, scrutiny and refuge, millions are begging for a place in our homes and these two boys' images show up the failure of the adult world to offer them a safe place to grow up. They are the counterpoint to the fear of another Paris, Nice, or San Bernadino. What is the hospitality that Jesus asks us to show in this world? *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.* In our own community we have people who suffer from mental illness, disability, loneliness, brokenness, and violence. I often wonder about those who have not heard the Gospel as being about or for them – who don't hear the invitation to come to the table. Who of our neighbors are we missing here at Grace Church? How do we open our hearts and homes in radical hospitality to them? What is the hospitality that Jesus calls us to in our neighborhood? Jesus said, *But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*"

Grace in the World

A week ago Saturday, La Gracia held its third annual Yard Sale to raise funds for the rental bus to Shine Mont for the parish retreat. We received generous donations of clothing, housewares, and furniture from many. (I kept saying to everyone that I thought we had all cleaned out our closets last year! Where'd all this stuff come from?) The donations came in, volunteers showed up to help set up, and the Farciert family showed up with their famous skirt-steak tacos to sell.

We paused at 8:00am to circle up and pray for God's blessing over the day and over all who would come to shop. And we began. It was non-stop activity for five hours. We were blessed with clear blue skies and lower humidity than we'd seen in Northern Virginia for weeks. I looked up at one point in the morning and counted at least 30 shoppers digging through the piles and boxes. One thing I've noticed about yard sales over the years that I have done my own or here at Grace: you get a real mixed bag of folk who come looking for bargains. Professional bargain hunters usually try to sneak in before the start time, checking out what we are carting from the church to the parking lot. They'll ask for vinyl or jewelry. You get people who are down on their luck, looking for deals but also looking for conversation. We had recent immigrants, retirees, families from Arlandria but also folk from Beverly Hills and Del Ray. Many of them enjoy getting into conversations with the volunteers. Several times I saw Bernarda Hernandez in deep conversation with one of the neighbors who had walked up from Presidential Gardens to find cheap clothing for their family. She'd ask them about their families, where they worked, what she could help them find. Glenda Farciert would chat with people about food and get them laughing as they paid \$5 for a plato. (Glenda's beef soft tacos will stand up to any restaurant anywhere on any given day, hands down.) Her food is a catalyst to lots of chatter as people take in the aroma of the beef and the fresh colors of the pico de gallo on their plate. I myself had some surprisingly intimate conversations with people about their health, about their lives, about faith. The Yard Sale is much more than fundraising for La Gracia – it is also about making people feel welcome and inviting them into community with Grace Church. It's about hospitality.

I believe Jesus asks us to open up space for these neighbors. I have a sneaking suspicion that he also wants us to really dig deep in our hearts to find a place to invite those whom we fear because they are different, because they are hard to love, because they may even cause us to suffer. I read a story recently about a neighbor of ours in Washington, DC, named Amir Arafa. The Washington Post reported that "Over the past year, Mr. Arafa has opened his studio apartment in Washington's Foggy Bottom neighborhood to refugees and domestic violence victims free of charge, and he's launched a website to help Americans across the country do the same. The concept of his site, called EmergencyBnB, resembles Airbnb, where people list their homes or a bedroom for travelers to rent by the night. But on EmergencyBnB, no money is exchanged and the people looking for places to stay are often in a crisis with nowhere to go. The 34-year-old from Egypt thinks immigration is about more than politics: It's about making vulnerable newcomers to the country feel at home. And the onus of that, he says, isn't on lawmakers, but everyday people. (Perry Stein, Washington Post, Aug. 25, 2016.)" How is that for radical hospitality to those who are imprisoned by circumstance or tortured by domestic violence? This young man's willingness to make himself and his home vulnerable for the sake of those who are suffering leaves me stunned by its humility and boldness. It is an example of what radical hospitality can look like in our modern world.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of a saying among the Early Christians, an anthem of the radical nature of following Christ: "We can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Indeed. With God and in the name of Christ we have no limit to how much we can open up our hearts and welcome others.

If we truly live into that trust, then we can boldly invite anyone and everyone to the wedding feast. We can welcome all with the radical hospitality that Christ has offered us. Amen.