

Sermon
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 17, Year C
September 2, 2007
by the Rev. Norman Bray

“When you are invited to a banquet, do not sit down in the place of honor.” This parable supposes that we all will at some point be invited to a banquet, and I am sure that we have been. We have been invited to professional functions that were centered around a banquet, civic functions that featured a lunch meeting, I myself attended Kiwanis on Thursday as a guest of Les Furr and Tom Sherrill and John deBrauwere have invited me to the Rotary Club luncheon on Wednesdays. We have attended family banquets at weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays, and we have banquets here at church regularly. I think that we have a banquet here at breakfast every Sunday morning, thanks to the Men of the Church. We know what banquets are about but we may not be quite so clear about this place of honor that Jesus talks about. It is easy enough when we are at a wedding reception or a birthday party or anniversary celebration to know who the honored guests are. And at civic club banquets the honored guests are always seated at the head table and usually we know if we are the honored guests but apart from that we do not rank ourselves by our place at the table, usually. If I am not at the head table then I try to sit with someone I know or with someone who seems like an interesting person, able to carry on a conversation. That is not the way that it worked in 1st century Palestine; there the banquet was presided over by the “Symposiarch” or president of the banquet and it was his job to assign seating based on ones honor and prestige, one’s place in society. How embarrassing would it be to be asked to get up out of the seat that you have just taken and be asked to move farther away from the head table? Have you ever seen that happen in a restaurant? I have seen a couple asked to get up in the middle of their meal and move to another table because a famous person came in and asked to be seated near the stage. They were humiliated and I do not think that they stayed for the show, the embarrassment was overwhelming. I hope that they had not tipped the maitre’d to get that table. But in our everyday lives this is not something that we really encounter because we know our place. Don’t take that in a negative way, it is not a criticism, we all have a place in this world, in this society, in this town, where we fit and we all know how to behave according to our place. There is a hierarchy in every society, in every city and town there is a pecking order and whenever we move to a new place it takes a while to figure out where we fit and what the boundaries are. If you have lived here all of your life you may not be aware of this but ask someone who has moved into this community or any community for that matter and you will see that there is a process of finding where you fit and then trying to work with that. One way to look at this structure is as a hierarchy. The dictionary defines a hierarchy as “the classification of a group of people according to ability or to economic, social, or professional standing.” Does that sound like the way that we divide ourselves? Of course it does and it is exactly that that Jesus is talking about both here and in the second parable when he says” **Luke 14:12-14** 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. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." All through the gospels we hear Jesus talking about breaking down the distinctions that we build between ourselves and recognizing that there is no distinction among the children of God and this reading today is no exception. In fact, it may be the most frightening teaching in the Gospel of Luke.

The Gospel of Luke is famous for expounding the virtues of hospitality. We constantly encounter Jesus either eating or feasting with people or feeding people. An author named Christine Pohl in an article in Sojourner Magazine refers to Jesus as both "a gracious host and a needy guest." In Luke, it is all about hospitality; it is about feeding each other, caring for each other, welcoming each other. It is in this hospitality that we recognize God's grace, God's abundance that we share and that recognition is manifested in our worship. We are gathered here today to acknowledge that God's grace is the only thing that sustains us and we in turn share that grace with the rest of the world. Hospitality informs our moral life because it is inseparable from close attention to the life of Jesus and we are nurtured by the rich and complex place of hospitality in the Christian tradition. Hospitality is also a part of our stewardship, of our giving back to God from the abundance that God has given us, it is a reflection of our gratitude to God for the grace that sustains us. I have encountered that gratitude, that blessed hospitality here at St. Luke's and I rejoice in it. At first, I was confused by some gatherings such as ELON and the Monday night gathering of the men of the church because I could not see what they were for, what was their purpose. I was looking to see how they were bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now and it bothered me a lot, and as I experienced these events I began to realize that they are expressions of gratitude for the abundance that God has blessed us with and I realize that they are celebrations of God's grace. Now I get it, and I am glad that I have been included, at least in the men's club. I don't think that I qualify for ELON.

However, we still have some things to consider about hospitality. Everything that I have spoken about so far is what we would have to call "safe hospitality." When we invite friends and relatives we don't have to worry too much about someone acting inappropriately, or at least we know which will act out in what ways. These are "safe" banquets and "safe" hospitality but in this parable Jesus is calling us to something that we would have to call "dangerous" hospitality. If we invite the crippled, the lame, the blind, the homeless, the addicted, the diseased, the people who don't speak our language or share our skin color then this banquet is not safe, not for us, because we do not know what will come of it, what will happen, how people will respond, and that makes me uncomfortable, it makes me anxious, nervous, maybe a little scared. But I can't get away from it, the scriptures call upon me to welcome the stranger. Today's lesson from Hebrew's says "**Hebrews 13:2** Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Last week I spoke of having to work at our faith, having to work to bring about the Kingdom of God and this is part of that work, welcoming the stranger, offering food and a safe lodging, this is the work that we have been given to do. I do not think for one minute that I can change the whole world and the way that human beings treat each other. I know that I cannot break apart the hierarchies that separate us and enable us to ignore the plight of people who

don't look like us or share our beliefs. But I also know that God can do all of that and more and that God has called me to live out the Gospel Word by beginning that work here and now and God did not call me as an individual, God called all of us as children of God to continue the work that Christians have been doing for two thousand years. And so now, the question before us is "How do we do that?" How do we break open the doors of St. Luke's and share the abundance that God has blessed us with in the light of the dangerous hospitality that Jesus has called us to? How can we, here in Marianna and Jackson County, reach out to the people that we would normally not come in contact with, the people who shop at that other grocery store, the people who buy their liquor by the ½ pint in a brown paper bag, the people who sell themselves in order to buy drugs? I do not have the answer to that question right now. It would be too easy for me to announce a program and then try to convince you to support it, but what we will do is pray about it, study and investigate and together we will come up with a plan that will allow us to share out of the abundance of the grace that God has given us, with people that we may feel are dangerous, but, hey, you never know. There may be some angel out there.