

**12 Pentecost
September 1, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In this morning's reading from Luke's Gospel Jesus is invited for a Sabbath meal by a leader of the Pharisees. Arriving early, he sits and watches as his fellow guests scramble for places of honor around the table. These guests know the pecking order, and they relish it. If I'm imagining the scene correctly, they jostle and shove each other, feigning dignity while still fighting for prestigious spots near the host.

After observing their drama for a while, Jesus calls them out with an appeal to a different standard. Knowing full well the social rules of his day, he shuns those rules and calls instead for a revolution. Not a revolution of arms and bloodshed, but a revolution in table manners.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor," he exhorts his fellow guests. "Go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.'" "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In God's kingdom the world's values are turned upside down. This is a variation on the theme of "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

Interestingly, the world has distorted this saying for its own purposes. In our procession into church each Sunday the acolyte leads the way, with the priest at the end of the line. "The first ... in this case the highest ranking liturgical figure in the service, the priest ... [The first] shall be last, and the last ... the acolyte who is at the bottom of the liturgical hierarchy ... the last shall be first." This is true in many areas of our life ... academic processions with the youngest and least experienced faculty at the beginning of the procession and the deans and president at the end. Or a curtain call for a theatrical play ... the supporting cast take their bows first, and the starring characters take their bows last.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have a hard time imagining Jesus as the Emily Post or Martha Stewart of the first century. I don't think this story is about teaching etiquette ... or status seeking ... to his disciples or whoever Jesus was addressing. But then Jesus added a little snippet ... the whole reason for telling the story in the first place. As if all this isn't counter-cultural enough, Jesus turns to his host and continues: "When you give a luncheon or 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity ... it is one of abundance ... where all are already welcome, already loved, already cherished. Because the currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance ... generosity, not stinginess ... hospitality, not fear.

I believe that God calls us to always be aware of the needs of the poorest of the poor ... including those who are at the very bottom of any hierarchal strata. Jesus consistently aligned himself with the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and those who lived in poverty. And, in this morning's reading from Luke, the tidbit that Jesus adds is, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed."

This sentiment is echoed in the Letter to the Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." It is a reminder of Abram ... before he was named Abraham ... being visited by three strangers who announce that Sarai ... before she was named Sarah ... would bear a child in her old age. The child, of course, was Isaac. The three strangers were indeed angels from God. And, our Judeo-Christian-Muslim heritage is dependent upon Abram's hospitality to strangers.

The will of God is that we see the poor and homeless ... those at the bottom of the hierarchy of commerce and currency of the world ... and we make ourselves aware of their situation. We do not need to look very far to see the plight of the poor clearly. In the midst of one of the wealthiest counties in Florida we see the homeless at every turn. We need to go no farther than Hastings to see systemic poverty, exploitation of migrant workers, and even human trafficking. And, regardless of how wealthy one may be in the currency of the world, when one experiences the loss of home, and livelihood, and possibly the loss of close loved ones, that person is, indeed, "poor."

So what do we do in the face of this kind of poverty in our own backyard? According to Jesus we are to invite them to dinner. This congregation knows that well. Dining with Dignity is just that ... a dinner party thrown for those of our neighbors in this city who are homeless. We also provide food for those who may have shelter, but are still hungry. The St. John's Ecumenical Food Pantry provides food to families who cannot find enough to feed all of them every day ... and still pay the rent and light bill. It addresses a situation that is euphemistically called "food insecurity."

As you know well ... I believe in radical, transforming hospitality. I believe the first response to the "poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" is to open our eyes, open our hearts, and open our spirits. I suggest that we also open our ears and listen. It is all too easy to assume we know what the other wants or needs from afar as if we were mind readers ... and when we do we often respond inappropriately. However, when we listen to another, it does more than give us information about their situation, it communicates to them that they are more than just an object ... that we value and respect them as fellow human beings ... our brothers and sisters ... and not just as a "victim."

Secondly, I suggest we pray. I often quote the catechism in our Book of Common Prayer that defines prayer “as responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words.” I believe we are called to prayer, not just the words of prayer, but the deep prayer of our soul ... repeated several times each day. Perhaps the prayer is the feeling of compassion rising within us, maybe it is tears that are shed, or perhaps it is the time taken out of our secure and safe life to intentionally hold those who suffer close to our soul, knowing that they are being held close to the heart of God.

However, “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by **deed**, with and without words.” We also pray by our deeds ... sometimes without words. We have been blessed with bounty and called to be stewards of God’s grace. If our pantry is full we are called to share its contents in a heartbeat. If there are clothes we are not wearing in our closet we are called to give them away without hesitation. When you go to the supermarket, I suggest that you pick up something for the Food Pantry. When you make your mortgage payment, I suggest that you remember those who are living without shelter after a hurricane, or a flood, ... or the homeless living in a car, or the woods behind Publix. When you take a drink of water ... or coffee, or soda ... I suggest that you think of those halfway around the world who are facing an outbreak of cholera because their water is contaminated ... and then make a gift to drill a well. This is the way we can pray “in deed” even if it is “without words.”

And, remember, we are a people of the Resurrection. That means that we know that there is life on the other side of death. That means that we are a people of hope. But, to get to that “new life,” we must fully experience the death, and its associated grief. We are called to share these burdens of suffering with our brothers and sisters ... near and far ... in our backyard and around the world. That suffering will linger long after these displaced people have roofs over their heads, food on their tables, and clothes in their closets. But, there will be a new life for them and for us. It gives us the faith to enter into that death with them and to share their grief. It empowers us to move beyond our fears of scarcity to open our hearts and wallets and checkbooks because we are looking at people who have no wallets or checkbooks ... and the new life promised them is also the new life promised us beyond our fears.

The leadership of this congregation takes all this very seriously. When we began talking about a fundraising campaign to address the renovations of our campus, the idea of pledging a tithe of all that was raised ... a 10% tithe ... to extend our radical transforming hospitality into the world around us. We set a goal of \$100,000 for the Beyond the Commons Campaign. As of this morning we have raised \$184,000!!! A tithe of ten percent of \$184,000 is \$18,400. That means that \$18,400 is available to support programs in our community that extends the radical transforming hospitality in a prayer of deed. Our Holy Scriptures tell us that this “tithe” is “of the first fruits” ... that is, off the top. On this past Tuesday evening the Mission Board met and addressed this issue and voted to donate \$15,000 to the **Operation New Hope – Ready4Work** program; and \$3,000 ... which can be leveraged into \$15,000 worth of food ... to the **Ecumenical Food Pantry**.

We are called to invite the “poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” to our table ... and Jesus says we will be blessed. And, we are called to respond to the homeless, and broken, and sick wherever they are ... and whoever they are ... because they are our brothers and sisters as well ... and I believe we will be blessed and know many blessings.

In the world we live in those at the top of the hierarchy are at the end of the procession. But Jesus is talking about God’s kingdom ... a world as it should be, not as it is. Our faith calls us to live as if God’s kingdom is a reality here and now ... not in the future. And, our faith calls us to live as if God’s kingdom is a reality in this place ... not somewhere else. In God’s kingdom those who are exalted by their own ego will be humbled, and those who are humbled by the values of the world will find themselves exalted. Indeed, those at the bottom of the world’s hierarchy will find themselves at the top in God’s kingdom.

As we take seriously what Jesus took seriously we must recognize that his exhortation to those at the Pharisee’s dinner are also words to us. We are called to invite the “poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” to our table ... and Jesus says we will be blessed. And we are called to respond to the homeless, and broken, and sick wherever they are ... and whoever they are ... because they are our brothers and sisters as well ... and I believe we will be blessed and know many blessings.

Amen