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St. John in the Wilderness  
Pentecost 12, Proper 17, Year C  
Hebrews 13; Luke 14

### The Hospitality of God

My summer travels reminded me of another trip that I took a few years ago. In July 2019, my wife and I led about a dozen high school students to the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico where we met Navajo Episcopalians. We learned about their culture and history, and we hosted a vacation bible school at one of their little desert parishes.

Normally, when I am having to go to the airport, the last thing I want to be is wearing my collar and my clericals, but since our high school students were flying through busy airports on our way to Albuquerque, I decided it would be good to stand out. What I discovered is that Albuquerque was a great town to be a priest in. I think because of the huge Latin American influence there, everyone thought I was a Roman Catholic priest. Talk about an easy time getting through security! Everyone was like, “Good morning, Father,” and “How are you today, Father?” I had one family of four stop me in the airport and beg me for a traveling blessing before their flight. I found myself walking a little taller there and thinking, “So, this is what a little respect feels like! I could get used to this.”

But the funniest thing happened when we were coming home. We all stayed the night in hotel rooms near the airport for our early flight the next day. Since my wife was with us on this trip, we roomed together. The morning of our flights, I get dressed in my clericals for the flight and leave the room with my bags. In the hotel hallway, this older hispanic lady sees me and just gives me the sweetest look, as if to say, “God bless you, Father.” Well, you should have seen the look on her face when this woman walked out of my hotel room behind me! Talk about an awkward elevator ride!

One of the things that I experienced on that trip out west was the unbelievable hospitality of the Navajo people. We went to this little parish, St. Luke’s in the Desert. It only had a dozen members. On our first day there, those elders of that community invited us into their lives by sharing their stories of struggle and triumph with such vulnerability and grace. They told us stories of struggling with addiction and loss, especially their young people, stories in which the love of Christ and his church was making them whole again. And to think, we were strangers to them but they invited us. We are people whose ancestors disparaged them, and yet they offered us such welcome. And when we received this hospitality—when people who even have so little celebrated and feasted with us—then we knew that God was in our midst. We weren’t just in New Mexico. We weren’t just in Navajoland. We found ourselves feasting in the Kingdom God, and it changed us. It’s changing us still.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” we read in Hebrews this morning, “for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.” I know that in your lives you have experienced so many moments of incredible welcome: times when you have been traveling, needing aid of some kind, and finding a person or a family offering you far more than you were due. I bet you can recall being a young person in school or starting out in life and the people who made a point of providing you with encouragement through a nice meal, a place to do laundry, an invitation to community that made all the difference in the world

There is something deeply spiritual, deeply sacramental that happens when we welcome strangers or when we take time to eat with one another and to show hospitality. The Scriptures are filled with stories such as these. Abraham meets three mysterious friends at the Oaks of Mamre. He welcomes and prepares a feast for these strangers and as they visit with one another, it becomes clear that the Lord – could it be the Trinity? – is visiting Abraham and Sarah in a desolate, wild place.

In the Gospel of Luke, disciples walk the Emmaus Road long ago when they meet a stranger who walks with them and talks with them. They begin to speak of their deep longings and hopes, and how this prophet Jesus of Nazareth had powerfully shown up only to be killed by the powers at be. The stranger then shares with them the Scriptures which point to the Messiah and when they arrive at the town, he asks to take his leave, but they beg him to stay for evening is at hand and the day is past. They do not know it is Jesus himself with them until at table, over food, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened to see the risen Lord – the guest who becomes the host who becomes the very feast itself.

My friends, you might imagine heaven as all kinds of things. We often try to shape the Kingdom of God in our own image and imagine heaven as some cloudland in the sky, or a place with pearly gates and golden streets. Maybe it’s a day at the beach or a morning on the golf course. But the images we find in our Gospel reading today are ones that liken the Kingdom of God to a great feast where there is plenty good room at God’s table.

Jesus tells these two little Kingdom stories today. He has a way of telling stories which say to us, “Here’s how it’s done in your culture, your economy, your kingdoms, but let me tell you about God’s way of life, God’s economy, God’s Kingdom.”

The first story is about how we like to be respected and appreciated – we like to be admired – so we move through the world wanting to make sure people know that they’re talking to someone important. We always want more for ourselves. But Jesus says, “Don’t claim for yourself honor and admiration – if you do, you’re going to get humbled before too long – but assume you are

not worthy of much at all, and you may just find others saying to you, "Friend, move up higher. We'd be honored if you would feast with us."

And then Jesus says, "When you throw a party, don't invite the well-to-do, the wealthy, your friends and relatives and neighbors, so as to make a social statement of some kind. Instead, when you throw a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot ever repay you, but in God's time you will have your reward."

At first reading, I thought Jesus was telling us to try to live this certain way: live with humility and care for the poor and the outcast. That sounds pretty good and maybe that is his message. But I think these passages changed for me when I realized that they are fundamentally about the hospitality of God. In other words, this is what God has done for you and for me. We find ourselves as people who are completely unworthy of God's attention and favor. We are ones obsessed with our own image, terrified of change or anything that threatens us, bent toward self-preservation, but God not only invites us to the feast but calls us "Friend" and insists that we move up higher. In Christ, God gives us a seat at the Kingdom banquet and transforms us from strangers to beloved children.

It's not just that we should serve the poor, the crippled, the lame; it's that you don't have to look very deeply into our souls to discover that *that* is who we are, too. We are not invited into the Kingdom of God because of our success, our volunteer hours, or how nice we think we are. If we are going to be honest about it for a moment, we are deeply broken people inside and out. Our blindness, the poverty of our souls, our many inner infirmities are crippling and yet God invites us to keep the feast because that is who God is.

That is the Good News here for us today. It is good news that we get to show hospitality to strangers, yes, but first we discover today on a deeply personal and communal level, that God sent Jesus to invite us to experience the hospitality of God's Kingdom. God invites you to the feast. God gives you a place of honor at his table. This is about the unbelievable hospitality of God and, yes, you're invited.