

August 31, 2025
Proper 17 – Year C
Trinity. St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Sirach 38:27-32a

Psalms 90:1-2, 16-17

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the Name of the holy and undivided Trinity. Amen.

Let mutual love continue. Literally, let *philadelphia* continue. With this deceptively simple directive, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews begins to close what is, for many, one of the most enigmatic books of the New Testament. In the spirit of full disclosure, it is one of my favorite books of the Bible.

Let mutual love continue --*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it* (Heb 13:1). The Greek word that we usually translate as “hospitality” is *philoxenia*, literally, “love of the strange.” Love of the stranger.

Most people in the ancient world did not stray far from their place of birth. Life was difficult and mobility was limited. One way in which the world became “larger” was to open one’s home to those that came from “outside.” Or, as we used to say in New England, “from away.”

Hospitality, then, was provided by those who had a “love of the strange,” by those who were curious about the wider world...about the “other”...about “them.”

Unknown seekers of hospitality brought news and stories of the outside world. After all, it was before social media; it was even before printing. But this hospitality was no one-way street; there was a wondrous exchange of mutual benefit between host and guest. Guests received food, and company, and protection (public inns were dangerous places). Hosts got a glimpse of the larger world.

Hospitality is an issue as old as time. The reference to entertaining “angels without knowing it” brings to mind Abraham and Sarah’s reception of the three visitors under the oaks of Mamre in Genesis (18:1-15).

The experience of being an alien or sojourner, vulnerable before others and dependent upon God, was deep in Israel's DNA. The Hebrew Scriptures are strewn with reminders not to vex or oppress strangers, because the children of Israel had themselves been sojourners in foreign lands.

For the writer of Hebrews, the truth is that we are all sojourners in a land that does not belong to us but, ultimately, to God. One of the verses omitted in the lectionary selection for today reminds us that *here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come*

(Heb 13.14). Or, in the well-known English version of Johannes Brahms' *German Requiem*: "here on earth have we no continuing place."

The imperative to *let mutual love continue* resonates throughout the New Testament. St. Paul wrote a great deal, especially to the Corinthians, about hospitality, or the lack thereof. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me' (Mt 25:40). In the early 6th century, St. Benedict summed it up beautifully: "When a guest comes, Christ comes." *Hospes venit, Christus venit*.

So, what happens when mutual love doesn't continue? When our anxieties about self-protection overwhelm our ability to see others as fellow sojourners? When love of the stranger, *philoxenia*, is replaced by *xenophobia* – fear of the stranger – fear of the other – fear of them?

What happens when we descend into *xenophobia*? We draw borders, we circle the wagons, we get pulled into social media silos, we build walls, we draw red lines and create covenant communities – for the sole purpose of making sure that they don't get too close to what belongs to us. "Super-exclusive" is seductively attractive, isn't it?

Three years ago, the world lost the distinctive prophetic voice that was Frederick Buechner (1926-2022). An ordained Presbyterian minister, he was known as much for his novels as his sermons. His style of storytelling often blurred the lines between the two.

Here are some thoughts about neighbors, taken from his 1988 book, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*. "If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces. Here it is love that is the frame we see them in."

We are called to fall in love with the stranger in the same way that God has fallen in love with us.

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With all that in mind, let's look at today's gospel. This sketch about a sabbath meal is one of many stories that Jesus told in which he uses food as a metaphor for power – power that can either create or destroy community.

Jesus often ate with people on the fringe, so much so that his critics called him a glutton and a drunkard. But Jesus also ate with religiously zealous and socially powerful people; that's where we find him today, eating dinner with a "prominent Pharisee." With people "watching him closely," he commented on both guests and hosts. And we're not surprised that Jesus tells them the opposite of what they're used to hearing.

He makes two points. The first, to the guests who were jostling for better places: don't "take" your place, but find your place. Understand that there are other people involved, and you may not end up where you expect you should.

This is hard, isn't it? I think we are insecure enough – and that life is tumultuous enough – that there is nothing we crave more than order. When I was in graduate school, I

would take the Metro North train from New Haven to New York for my organ lessons. I can't tell you the number of times someone harrumphed near me, letting me know that I was in their seat. Even if you don't have that experience, you might be familiar with "my parking place" or "my pew."

Secondly, Jesus tells the host, and us, that when making up our guest lists and deciding how to share the blessings we've received, not to be strategic. Don't aim for reciprocity. Be extravagantly, forgetfully generous. True hospitality, Jesus tells us, is that offered without hope of return – it's pure gift.

And, maybe now our ears are hurting, because Jesus is starting to sound a little out of touch. Why on earth invite those who have nothing to give you, who can do nothing for you, and who might mean nothing to you? It's crazy. Except...

Except, of course, that this is the way God wants us to treat each other. Because it's the way God treats us – creating us, caring for us, forgiving us, redeeming us – even though we can do nothing meaningful for God in return. In fact, the only thing we can do in return, is to say "God has given me good things for no good reason and invites me to do the same for others."

At table after table across the Galilee and beyond, Jesus was giving us foretastes of what hospitality will look like in the reign of God. Over and over and over again, Jesus tells us that God's rules are different than ours.

According to the late Henri Nouwen, "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring *others* (men and women) over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."¹ Just think of it – a space where change can take place. Change in the stranger, change in us; letting mutual love continue.

Today's Collect speaks of mutuality: "Almighty God, *thou hast* so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives." The word "all" is used twice; it's a word that cannot be modified. There's no such thing as "part of all" or "some of all" or even "most of all." All is all.

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This week, the gospel ideal of "all" is under assault in two particular ways. Tomorrow, Labor Day, we honor laborers, the "burden bearers of the earth" about whom we just sang. It is also a day to remember the Labor Movement that was birthed into a period of deep economic inequity in the face of government violence designed to snuff it out. As I wrote earlier this week, we seem to be on replay, living in a world where the wealth gap is widened by the same governmental forces that continue to slash the social safety net that would see and honor all of our neighbors. So much for mutual hospitality.

There is a West African proverb that was a favorite of the late John Lewis, he of "good trouble" fame. It goes, "when you pray, move your feet." Maybe to one of the protests

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 1975.

tomorrow, and in the next days. Or maybe to the Post Office to mail all those letters to your representatives that you've been writing in your head.

The other assault on mutual love this week was more openly violent. Since Wednesday morning's horrific shootings at Annunciation School in Minneapolis, a parish I used to know well, I've been struggling with how to speak about this latest unspeakable outrage to our common humanity, with the wounding of some 18 young Minneapolitans and the deaths of Fletcher Merkel, 8, and Harper Moyski, 10. Then I read Ann Lamott's op-ed in the NYT on Friday. I imagine many of you have seen it, but I want to share a bit of it.

"After one school shooting, my beloved rabbi friend Sydney Mintz told me a story from the Midrash (a collection of stories about what the Hebrew Bible teaches). When Moses smashed the original tablets with the Ten Commandments and stomped off back to Mount Sinai, someone swept up all the shards. They were eventually added to the ark alongside the replacement copy of the commandments."

"We drag around our brokenness in the same container as our holiness."

"Anger and murder have always been our lot and are going to keep happening. One of Adam and Eve's sons killed another, and we still see this every day. It's real, and all you can choose is how you're going to react. Do you close yourself off, as if that will protect you, or do you try to stay open and get to work in the world?"

"The parents gathered around me that day to ask how they could talk to their kids about the shooting. Talk about love, I said, and listen. They asked: Was there meaning? No, not yet."

"But, I suggested, perhaps it was a good day to make soup. When (*my rabbi friend*) Syd feels most hopeless, she makes matzo ball soup for the sick and lonely and friends; in my Presbyterian tradition, we tend toward casseroles. These offer consolation to the soul. There are always a lot of people who need them, like me.²"

When you pray, move your feet – or your soup ladle. *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Amen.*

² Ann Lamott, *What I Told My Sunday School Students About Death*. NYT, August 29, 2025.