

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 1, 2013  
Proper 17, Year C

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Jeremiah 2:4-13  
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

“When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s lessons are built upon two major principles of the Christian understanding of human existence: 1) we are not God, and 2) God is our helper and provides everything we need for joy. And we tend to forget both most of the time, at least I do. The prophet Jeremiah said that that is what the Israelites had done. God wanted to provide them with fresh, cool, water bubbling up from a spring. Instead they turned their backs on that gift, and made their own water tanks that were full of leaks and could only hold water that would quickly become stagnant and nasty. It seems really dumb. Yet we do it all the time. God always wants to give us really wonderful things, and instead we want to do it ourselves, do it our own way. My mother was fond of telling anyone who would listen that, when I was young, she would start to do something for me, like button a winter coat, and I would scream “Self! Do it self!” I still have this tendency. I have trouble asking for help. When someone offers to help me, my first internal reaction is to reject the offer. We want to be self-sufficient. Yet what we can produce or provide on our own is a very poor substitution for what God would give us. We need to receive all we need from God. If we try to get around that, we are forsaking God and we are getting a crummy substitute.

In the Gospel reading Jesus speaks about banquets. He says we should not be presumptuous and take a seat near the head table, because then the host might tell us to move to a less important place, and that would be really embarrassing. Instead we should take a more humble place. Then, if there are any changes, the host will say to us, “Friend, come up higher.”

Again, as with God, we should be in the position of receiving gifts not taking things as if we were entitled to them.

Jesus goes on to say that when we are the hosts and others are coming to our table, we should not invite people who can reciprocate and invite us to their homes. Instead, we should invite people who cannot repay us at all. This practice of hospitality to those who are in no position to repay is linked in the text to the exhortation to humility. Humility is to assume that one is entitled to no special treatment. We deserve no more than anyone else. When we do a good deed with the expectation that it will be reciprocated, then we are no longer humble, we think we are now entitled to something good. We have purchased with our good deed a credit in the universe's bank of good stuff. We have bought a higher position on the moral ladder. But doing good is not about buying anything. It is about doing good. Goodness for a reward is not virtue, it is mere commerce.

Humility is so central to the Christian character that we incorporate into liturgical ritual. In processions in and out of the church, the people go in reverse order according to ecclesial rank. The bishop, if there is one is always at the end, not up in front. In the triumphal processions of Roman emperors, the Emperor rode up near the beginning, and the slaves and prisoners brought up the rear. We Christians turn the ways of the world upside down.

There is another aspect of humility. There is these days considerable wisdom about the need for human persons to have adequate self-esteem. Those who lack self-esteem do not utilize their gifts to full advantage, have trouble forming healthy relationships, and are vulnerable to various kinds of self-destructive behaviors. Humility is not groveling. The word comes from *humus*, the Latin word for earth. Humility is to remember that we are earth and to earth we shall return. As Reg Harrison mentioned to me, humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

Humility means understanding that each of us is no better than anyone else, and no worse. We are human. We strive after dreams, and we fail. When we fall we get up and can often

use a hand up. The Church is really a twelve step group. Did you know that? We are all recovering sinners. Good morning. My name is Bevan, it has been 15 minutes since my last sin. The twelve steps of AA were taken from the New Testament and are a summary of the Gospel. In order to stay sober, the alcoholic must remember who he or she is. In order for a Christian to be holy, the sinner must remember who he or she is. It is a great compliment when one says of another, "He or she is so real."

We are human beings. We are made of the material of the physical universe and bearing the image of God in a body inbreathed with the Holy Spirit. We sin, we repent, we get sick and receive healing. Sometimes we are heroes, and sometimes we are cowards. Sometimes, we are generous, and sometimes we are calculating. But we are all in the same boat; we are all in it together.

Sometimes the reason we are hesitant to welcome the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind, is that they make us uncomfortable. In this parish we try to be open to every person whom the Lord brings to us. When those who have fewer resources come, we don't want to flaunt our better fortune, and we don't want to be reminded of our frailty, nor of the fact that we have done nothing to deserve that good luck. Conversely, sometimes when we are injured, sick, hurting, or in need, we don't want to let our brothers and sisters in Church know. We stay away, we hide, we keep our needs secret. This, too, is pride, and it deprives one's brothers and sisters of the opportunity to do good, to pray, to help, to comfort.

Is there anyone here who has never sinned? Is there anyone here who has never been sick? Never been low on money? Never been embarrassed by something? See everyone of us has been there. Not everyone of us has been everywhere, it is true, but each of us has been there. So let's admit it. Let us have the humility to ask for help. Let us have the humility to welcome those who remind us of our fragility. Let us admit that we need each other. Let us admit we need God. And let us be particularly welcoming to those who can repay us least.

Which means that we should all cut each other some slack. There are times in this

community when one person does something that is annoying to another. Perhaps someone has gone and done something without checking with others. Perhaps someone's manner or affect is off putting. In such cases each of us has a choice. We can do nothing and say to ourselves, "Oh that's Mehitabel being Mehitabel again." This is fine if we can really live with that behavior. Or we can hang on to our irritation perhaps even complaining to some third party. In this case we have no ground to complain about any negative feelings we have about the parish or even this person. We are the ones carrying the poison. Or we can go to the person and in as calm a voice as we can muster, use an "I-statement" such as: "Bevan, when I was talking to you at coffee hour and you started to look around the room instead of at me, it made me feel that I was not important to you. It made me feel bad." There is no judgment in such a statement; it simply gives me some information about the impact my behavior had on you. It will be up to me how to respond. If we are to make St. Michael's the most inviting, loving, and happy place it can be, we need to learn to practice this kind of gentle truth-telling all the time. Triangulation will never help anything. This is hard work and we all need one another's support and help in doing it.

As we come to the altar this morning let us present ourselves with only our need and the simple offering of our faith. Let us make room for our neighbors to do the same. Then we will be blessed. Then we will be doing good. And in this fellowship of real, contingent, needy creatures, we may discover one who had nowhere to lay his head, one who needed help to carry a cross, one who still has nail holes in his almighty hands. One whose very body is broken and whose blood is poured out for our nourishment and life. One who says to each of us here today, "Friend, come up higher."

I have a backpack that I use when I am hiking. On a long hike, it will contain a bivvy sack in case I have to stay overnight, a rain jacket and a fleece, a first aid kit, fire making materials, at least two water bottles, a lunch, a compass, altimeter, and map. I did not make any of these things. Some people in a factory made most of the things. I made the sandwich in the lunch, but I made it from bread that I did not bake, and which in turn is made of wheat I did not sow nor did I reap. I did not make the surveys or measure the mountains and trails that appear on the map. And the pack itself was a gift from my daughters. Everything I need for my wellbeing on a hike came from other people. And when I put all that stuff in my backpack, I can tell myself that on the trail I will be self-sufficient. What nonsense! All I have done is pre-loaded the help from others that I will need to complete the project.