

The Rev. Kristin Krantz
St. James', Mt. Airy
8/28/16

Proper 17C
Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

In 2006 when we moved from Massachusetts to California, we didn't know anyone. Not an easy thing to do with a 15 month in tow while starting two careers. In fact, when we moved I didn't have a job, or any real prospects for one.

Right out of seminary and newly ordained as a Deacon, I needed to find a place to hang my stole and serve, non-stipendiary if nothing else, in order to be ordained as a priest a few months later. And so I was beyond thrilled when one of my favorite seminary professors reached out and connected me with someone at the Episcopal seminary in Berkeley.

It turned out that I wasn't just making a local connection who could point me toward where I might volunteer to serve. She happened to be the faculty member who helped graduating folks find placements, and she let me know about a newly posted position for an Associate Rector at a parish in Berkeley.

The rest, as they say, is history. I was hired at All Souls and ended up serving there for eight years – through much transition: a beloved Rector leaving, an Interim time during Rector search, a new Rector called, and a period of numerical and spiritual growth that led to the need for organizational change.

It was through All Souls that we met Carol Anne & Don Brown. Don was the retired Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Sacramento, and Carol Anne was at the time the Executive Director of a non-profit foundation.

For lack of a better image, and because it fits, Don and Carol Anne adopted us.

They welcomed us into their home every Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. And not just us, but a whole host of other ‘strays’ who didn’t have family close by. Holidays at their house found us seated with 20+ other folks at their big dining room table – a steady rotation of family and friends, some of whom were there every time, and others who rotated in and out over time.

They became family to us, and indeed, they are one set of Jasper’s Godparents.

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One of the things I most appreciated about meals at Carol Anne & Don’s is that Carol Anne always set out place cards at the table. She was adept at this practice, I think in all the years we attended holiday feasts I never sat by the same person twice. There was never a sense of being stuck at the ‘wrong end’ of the table. Indeed, there never seemed to be a place of pride at their table. It didn’t feel like manipulation to be given a seat, it felt like a gift of love – a seat that was *chosen* for you, not where you were put. And none of us struggled to figure out where to sit and what configuration worked.

There certainly wasn't any of the jockeying for position and carefully crafted artifice that Jesus described in today's Gospel passage from Luke.

It was because of all this, and Carol Anne and Don's inherent ability to welcome anyone and everyone, that I can say that I experienced a sense of true hospitality at their home.

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Entering into a new place or community can be scary, or at the very least, induce a bit of stress. We don't necessarily know all the norms, all of the personalities, all of the dynamics at play.

And whether it's lunch in the school cafeteria, a meeting at work, or coming to church on a Sunday – there is always the question of where to sit, and who to sit with.

There's an old joke, and several variations of it as a cartoon, about the “welcoming” congregation that wants new members, as long as they “know” not to sit in the pews already “taken” by others.

We don't have pews here, and yet even as movable as our space is, don't most of you have a favorite spot you prefer to sit? We all tend to scope out a place and stake a claim to it, even if we're flexible enough to shift when needed.

But finding a place, in an open space with a plethora of options, can be hard. We don't want to take the pew that Ms. Barbara Jean has sat in since she was a child. We don't want to take up an odd number of chairs so that there's no room for the family with small children next to us in the row. We want a good seat, but not at the expense of others.

This dynamic is part of what Jesus was pointing to. How a group sits together says a lot about the community as a whole, and about their spiritual health.

Is it a rigid system? Or is there flexibility? How are new people invited into finding a place to sit? Or not? Does a community cultivate an ethos of hospitality which conveys that there is always room for more at the feast, and what's more, we planned a seat just for you?

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Luke's Gospel has more meal-time scenes than all the others, and he connects spiritual hunger to physical hunger. So, a meal was the setting when Jesus talked about these complex dynamics of hosting and hospitality, of welcome and justice, and of course, community.

Our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews today has something to say about these themes as well.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by do that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

I love this image, as long as it's seen not as a motivation for mutual love and hospitality, but as a result. Because I have certainly experienced it. Have you?

Have you extended a kind word, or paid it forward, or offered support to someone only to realize afterward that that interaction was the most meaningful, God-filled, part of your week? Others looking in might say that you were the "angel" helping out, but you know that the real angel was the person who showed you what it means to accept God's love when it's offered.

Or have you ever gone shopping for the Mt. Airy Net food pantry and realized it's different than when you're shopping for yourself? Nobody else knows it. (Or maybe they are wondering why you're buying 6 tubes of toothpaste, 4 boxes of mac-n-cheese, various spices, peanut butter, and several jars of pasta sauce.) But the point is, it feels different to pay for those things because they are being bought in mutual love – and to be given away, just as God's love is always given.

Hospitality is a wonderful, hard, amazing, heart-filled gift. Scripture, and indeed our own lives, are filled with stories about it. It makes me wonder: In what ways does St. James' do hospitality well? What are the ways we can grow in hospitality?

At the end of the day, how we practice hospitality, what we believe about it, how we extend it, depends on our willingness to accept God's abiding hospitality in the form of love.

Let us welcome this love – and through it both friend and stranger – in our church, and in our lives.

~ AMEN ~