

14TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST ~ September 2, 2007

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

Being the Church

Henri Nouwen talks a great deal about hospitality in his book, *Reaching Out*. He says that in our world full of strangers, where so many of us are alienated from our past, our culture, our country – in a world where we rarely know our neighbours and have so little time for family and friends – in a world where we often feel disconnected even from ourselves and separated from God – in our world we witness what Nouwen describes as *a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found*. He continues by affirming that it is possible, even obligatory, *for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where everyone can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings. It is our vocation to convert hostility into hospitality, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced*.

Nouwen is not talking about some watered down hospitality that conjures images of insipid tea parties with bland conversation and a general atmosphere of coziness. He urges a restoration of our understanding to its true biblical richness in which hospitality is much, much more than simply an important virtue. Hospitality is not limited to receiving a stranger in our home – it is a fundamental attitude toward others. Hospitality is inviting others into our heart and creating free space where each one can find their path and come to know God.

Some days I think I am a very hospitable person – other days not so much! I believe that is true of the church as well, and of the Knox community of faith. Last year when I picked teens up after camp one of them told me that he wouldn't be attending church any more – not exactly the fruit you hope the camping experience will bear! He said he just didn't experience God at church the way he did at camp – God didn't seem “present” for him at Knox. I have pondered that in my heart all year. I worry about it. It occurs to me that this person is missing the sense of community that is generated at camp – the free space to live and grow spiritually. There is an echo of that in the most recent issue of *The Record* too. As welcoming as we try to be and as we think we are – some “strangers” (whether they have been here often or only one time) don't find us to be a free and fearless space where true community is fully formed.

This is the key message of both the New Testament passages today. The parable that Jesus relates in Luke's gospel pushes hospitality far beyond the pleasantries of feast and fellowship to humility and empathy. Jesus reminds those who would listen that the guest and the host are both part of the equation. Receiving hospitality is just as significant as offering it – there is mutuality. That same care and consideration for others is addressed by the author of Hebrews as the question of what it means to be the church is considered.

Following the stirring message of the previous chapters the preacher in Hebrews now turns to more routine aspects of congregational life knowing that the health and hope of the community of faith is most honestly measured in its announcements and ordinary practices. How does the community of Christians live day by day? How do we announce to the world what sets us apart? It is the ministries of hospitality and compassion, our stewardship, our worship and service and our attentiveness to Jesus – these are the marks of Christian community.

Let's look at what is essential for abundant life in a community of Christian faith...

First we are called to hospitality. Show love for other members of the community of faith – show love to strangers and guests. Whenever the church shares a meal together, as we plan to do next Sunday with our “Finger Food” lunch – whenever we come together in any way it is to show mutual love. Mutual love is a fundamental trait of good Christian community and crucial for survival where a community must stick together in the face of dangers. Offering hospitality is also vital for communication with other Christian communities – it is an essential component of networking among and beyond believers. This love should not be so in-grown that the church becomes a closed club unable to make a place at the table for the stranger. Remember that as we open our

space generously to others whom we do not yet know – strangers – we may entertain angels without knowing it. Each one who gathers within the embrace of our hospitality brings the presence of God with them.

Next we are invited to empathize with those suffering in prison – it is a ministry of compassion. This is not a call to condescending charity work but to attend to others as though we were in prison with them – it is a call to solidarity. There are many contexts in our society both near and far away where violence and exploitation flourish and our efforts can make a difference. We don't do this because we are naturally compassionate – most of us are not – we do this as an imitation of Jesus, who entered so fully into the human situation that he is able to sympathize with our weakness and offer the grace we truly need.

In verses four and five the attention moves slightly toward the individual as the preacher talks about sex and money. **Respect your marriage promises – be faithful in relationships. Keep free from the love of money. Be content.**

In our Thursday morning Book Club this week we talked about adultery. The author noted that a *covenant relationship to one partner is the gift God gives* to help us learn faithfulness – perhaps in the hope that we might eventually learn faithfulness to God. She also suggests that Christian faith is fundamentally about relationships of all kinds – based in our personal relationship with God in Christ. If we respond to God's call to respect our vows in marriage we are well on our way to honoring our covenant relationship with God.

Within that covenant relationship we are reminded that Christian living does not get caught up into consumerism because that does not fit very well with mutual love which is at the heart of Christ's message. The promise that God will not forsake us is not a guarantee of material security so much as an assertion that this is the relationship which matters most and which should concern us most. It liberates us from captivity to materialist values which create so much anxiety and fuel so much greed.

The community of faith can be undermined by love as much as by hate – loving the wrong person (as is the case in adultery) and loving the wrong things (money). Sex and money are not the problem – we are called to honest mutual love – to faithfulness in relationships – and to confidence in the promises of God that assure us we need not be consumed with avarice.

Finally we are directed to worship and service. Throughout this sermon the author of Hebrews has been calling the hearers back to the faith they confessed at their conversion and to which they held firm in the early days. The advice is to remember those who are mentors – teaching the faith by word and example. We are to think about Jesus Christ who is a sure and constant presence. Through Christ we are led to worship that comes from the heart and from the lips – worship that results in doing good to others and sharing; remembering that true worship is both the fruit of witness and action.

This last point seems to bring us full circle – if our worship is within a context of doing good and sharing our time and place of worship, our life as a community of faith will be one of rich hospitality. Christian community isn't a holy huddle of worshippers scared for their lives and totally obsessed with religious rituals. That wasn't what the leaders of early Christian communities hoped for and it isn't what we aspire to either. Christian community is about expressing and sharing love in the name of Jesus Christ. In that context we praise God because God reaches out in love and compassion.

According to the passage from Hebrews this is what is essential for abundant life in Christian community. It is an interesting list formed mostly in terms of action and behaviour rather than belief. We are often tempted to postpone or evade action by arguing about belief. Certainly we need to consider both but sometimes a little action is what we need most. **Amen.**