

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West,
FL August 28, 2022
Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Guest List

Today I begin with the story of a deacon, Deacon Lawrence, whose feast day is August 10.

In the middle of the third century, in the 250s, Lawrence was chief of the seven deacons of the congregation of Rome. The deacons were in charge of administering the church budget, especially with regard to the care of the poor and widows and orphans.

In 257, the Roman empire began a new persecution of Christians. This one was aimed particularly at the clergy and at the laity of the upper classes.

All Church real estate was confiscated. Christians were forbidden to meet.

The bishop of Rome at the time, Sixtus II, and most of his clergy were executed on August 7 of the following year, 258.

One tradition holds that the Roman prefect knew that Lawrence was the principal person in charge of the church finances. The bishop and priests had been executed, and the prefect promised to spare Lawrence's life if he would surrender the wealth of the church.

Lawrence agreed but said it would take him three days to gather the church's wealth. The deal was made.

During those three days, Lawrence placed all the money of the church, all the money in his care into the hands of people he knew he could trust, people who were faithful stewards. He disbursed the church's financial resources.

Then, on the third day, he assembled the sick, the aged, the poor, the widows, and the orphans of the congregation. He presented these people to the prefect and said, "These are the treasures of the Church."

Of course, the prefect was outraged and him executed immediately. The date was August 10.

This same tradition holds that the spectacle of Lawrence's courage made a great impression on the people of Rome and that many converted to Christianity as a result. Minds were changed concerning Christianity being a socially undesirable movement that should be stamped out on account of Lawrence's witness and martyrdom.

The tradition about how Lawrence died and what he did in the last days before his death is just that, a tradition. Whether it is a factual story or not, it is a true one.

And, the idea that the most vulnerable are the most valuable is basically the same point that Jesus is making in today's gospel.

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Jesus is invited on a sabbath to dinner at the home of a religious leader, a leader of the Pharisees. He is not the only guest. Luke says others are watching Jesus closely. He's watching them as well.

He watches the other guests jockeying for position, vying for the best seats, the places of honor at the table.

What were they doing? They were living out the values of the dominant culture, that's what.

In Greco-Roman culture in the first century, showing off your status, wealth, and other forms of prestige were the done thing. If you have it, flaunt it. People should be impressed with you if you are impressive. Make the most of it.

This is a dinner party in the home of a leader of the Pharisees on a sabbath day. We don't know who the other guests were besides Jesus, but it's a pretty safe bet that they were all Jews.

Let's review for a moment about the Pharisees. Their name today is a synonym for hypocrites. But there's more to their story.

The Pharisees were kind of a religious sect within Judaism, kind of a political group, kind of a school of thought, and kind of a social movement.

It's because of them that the synagogue system began during the Babylonian captivity and was brought back; they are the people who figured out how Jews could remain Jews even when in exile. They had exhibited important leadership in many ways.

In a certain sense, it would be difficult to find Jews who, at least in theory, were more concerned about how to be proper Jews than the Pharisees.

And yet, look how the values of the broader culture had changed the culture of Judaism and the practices of the Pharisees, such that these folks are acting just as any group of Romans or Greeks would, just like any group of Gentiles would at a dinner party, jockeying for the best spots.

Jesus observes their behavior and then speaks. Luke says he tells a parable. Remember that there's at least one thing in every gospel parable that would have been a surprise to the original hearers, something that might have shocked them or pulled them up short or at least made them think about something in a different way.

These original hearers would have been aghast to hear Jesus say that they should take the lowest-status places at a wedding banquet. *What do you mean, don't exalt yourself? That's why we so hard work to have the status we have so that we can receive preferential treatment. Of course, we'll take the best seats. We've earned them. We deserve them.*

What is the surprise in this brief parable? In short, that Jesus is valorizing humility. Humility, remembering that we are but dust, soil, humus, the root of humility, and being fine with being close to the earth, to the humus. The virtue of humility, not at all prized in the Greco-Roman world, is a cardinal virtue for those who would follow Jesus.

After this short parable about taking the low place, the humble place, Jesus then addresses his host, the leader of the Pharisees.

Next time you have a party, don't invite these folks. Invite the people who could never repay your invitation, who could never have that kind of party and invite you.

What kind of people should be invited? The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. The sick, the aged, the widows, the orphans. The treasures of the church.

Jesus' teaching that humility is a virtue, that the vulnerable are valuable is a fresh teaching, a needed reminder. Across Christian history, we see that the Church is always in need of being reminded that following Jesus will place us in tension with some of the values of the dominant culture. It will invite us to something different.

Just because someone has nothing doesn't mean they have no value. Those with hardly anything matter as much to God as those who seem to possess everything.

To rely on wealth, position, and status and to be overly impressed, influenced, deferential to, and enticed by wealth, position, and status is to miss the point of the gospel. To rely on these things, is the equivalent of what Jeremiah calls forsaking God, the fountain of living water, and turning to human-carved cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

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Everyone is welcome in this beautiful banquet hall, this holy filling station where we come to be nourished to go out again to be who we are: Christ's body, broken and given for the world. Everyone is welcome, but not everyone knows they are welcome. Not everyone feels welcome.

Hundreds of people come inside this space, week in week out, seven days a week and look around. And many, many hundreds more pass and never come in.

There are many reasons people might never come in. Many may see this beautiful building and get the sense that it is a kind of private clubhouse for those who are already members.

There are many, many reasons people don't come to services on Sunday mornings or Wednesday mornings in this place or in any other church building.

There are many, many obstacles that keep folks from finding their way in here.

And yet, in words variously attributed to Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple and to others, "The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members."

The mission of the Church, to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ (BCP, 355), is not something we are to undertake if we have spare time. It's the *mission* of the Church: it's primary not ancillary.

How can we fulfill this mission in our particular historical moment and in this particular and peculiar ministry context? Go where the people are. Meet people where they are.

What if the people we meet are strangers or just downright strange? The second reading has us covered here: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

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Too often throughout Christian history and too often in the lives of many congregations, those who have received and accepted the invitation to God's banquet have then tried to determine who else is worthy to be invited or to accept or who else we'd prefer to have at the banquet—as if it's our banquet.

But it isn't our banquet. It's God's banquet and God's Church and God's great good news in Christ. And this table isn't ours but God's.

In the words of the Iona Community on the island of Iona in Scotland:

This is the table, not of the Church but of Jesus Christ. It is made ready for those who love God and who want to love God more. So come, you who have much faith and you who have little, You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time or ever before, You who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come, not because the Church invites you; It is Christ who invites you to be known and fed here.

The banquet we celebrate here is a prelude to the banquet prepared from the foundation of the world. Everyone is invited to that banquet. Everyone. Our job is to pass out the invitations. And then to share the feast with all those who accept and come to dine.

God help us live and be this good news.