Devotional Pentecost 13A
(Romans 12:9-21)

I’m having a discussion with my doctor about stress; he says, “but your job is harder than mine.” I look at him in amazement, no, it can’t be, I can’t relate to your pace; the relentless decisions you make that effect people’s health, the pressure to get it right.

He looks at me and says, “yes, there’s pressure, but there’s also limits, I’m not dealing with people’s souls, I’m dealing with people’s bodies, I know what I can and can’t do. Your stress is different; you’re trying to help people’s souls, you never know what to really do or if what you’ve done is the right thing or if what you’ve said is relevant or not.

I look at him and say, “I’ve never thought of it that way before, and what you’ve just said explains something to me, a constant nagging sense of incompleteness, a feeling that feels like large-scale failure.”

He smiles and says nothing more.

This exchange, though it happened many years ago, is something that goes on to be truly formative for me as a priest; it changes the way I operate, it continues to challenge me in prayer and shape the way I talk with people.

Probably just as importantly it gives me new insight into the “stresses” we all face in late modernity, when the very notion of a “soul” is challenged, when there doesn’t seem to be a clear path; in a culture that doesn’t consider our efforts at vibrant spirituality relevant.

It may be a strange way to do it, but I’m trying to lay the table, that is, provide a link to our first reading.

The first Christians too faced the stress of trying to live what was then a brand new spirituality in the face of an uncomprehending and sometimes hostile culture.

Paul, knowing this, and who wants to help them with everything he’s got knows he has to “lay the table” with rich theology, that’s the backdrop, the tablecloth, the cutlery, the bowls etc. And then he has to give them a feast to eat with all that beautiful silverware.

This, it turns out is a good way to think about how to link the theory and the practice because Paul isn’t just giving them a list of does and don’ts but an explanation of “Eucharist.”

Eucharist starts here but it extends into every nook and cranny of our lives. Just as Jesus’ often began with meals and then stretched into full welcome and healing and teaching along the byways of Galilee.

So in Romans we have amazing “setting the table texts like:”

“there is therefore now no condemnation fore those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.”

 Or “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption…we are children of God.”

And “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor live, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things to come, nor powers…nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Passages like these soar in poetic elegance and metaphysical significance. To use language from my last devotional on Ecclesiastes, you can’t gild these lilies, they’re fully gilded! There is no rhetoric that tops these claims.

This is the mountaintop and Paul has climbed it because of something of supreme practical importance. The mutual fellowship of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The mutual fellowship of sworn enemies in the heart of Caesar’s capital to proclaim a radically different politics, a Jesus politics formed by Jesus’ own table fellowship with all and sundry: the prostitutes and tax collectors, the rich and the poor, the religious establishment and those “sinners” who checked none of the pharisaical boxes.

And after exhorting us at the beginning of chapter 12 to live from this vision, to have our minds transformed by this vision, Paul says, “now here’s the food:”

“Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour…be patient in suffering.” Words like, “extend hospitality to strangers,” or “if your enemies are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty give them something to drink,” reflect not only Jesus’ own ministry, but the practical realities of the new emerging house churches in Rome near the beginning of Nero’s reign.

To overcome evil with good, Paul’s final punchline, may, eventually, as civilization develops, will include legislation and regulations but before any of that, that “overcoming” begins at table, begins by offering everyone grace and kindness. It starts by creating the space for practical love. It starts by not asking too many questions about what each of us believes, who each of us votes for, what are tastes are in, well, literally, anything, but in simply offering to each other what Jesus offered: the nobility of trying to live at peace with all.

This is a peace, not of avoidance but of active blessing. I wonder what would happen if liberal churches who are filled with “true blue” democrats reached out to practically bless Appalachian churches who are “QAnon believers” and die-hard Trump supporters? And Vice versa?

Most scholars think that one of Paul’s main goals in writing the letters that he did was to encourage Gentile Christians to collect a generous offering for Jewish Christians who were suffering from a horrible famine, Jewish Christians who often believed that Gentiles couldn’t be followers of Jesus without undergoing circumcision and/or observing Jewish food laws and sabbaths.

All of which brings us to that strange line and back to my opening story “if your enemies are hungry feed them…for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Huh? What?

The entire verse comes directly out of Proverbs 25. Commentators have struggled to explain this image, but Liddy Barlow says that we needn’t stretch to identify a historical precedent in order to understand what the author of Proverbs and therefore what Paul is talking about.

We’ve felt that flaming coal ourselves. We’ve all experienced the hot discomfort of realizing we were wrong. We’ve all felt the distinctive fiery squirm when our pettiness contrasts with another’s graciousness. We call it “burning guilt” for a reason.

Here we need to distinguish guilt from shame. Shame is that feeling that we all know too well, especially after we’ve been shown up; after we’ve failed at something as simple as hitting the golf shot you’ve wanted to hit, to finding yourself without a partner when, according to your lights, you thought things were going well. It’s a swampy feeling that pervades your being; you feel like curling up in a ball and hiding.

Guilt, on the other hand is that feeling that something oh, oh, I’ve done something wrong, I’ve made a mistake that is negatively effecting others; I’ve hurt you and now I’m sorry I did.

As Brene Brown the researcher tells it, guilt is the emotion that says “you’ve made a mistake, but there is hope, you can say sorry, you can change, you can learn.” Guilt is correlated with growth, with change of direction, with new perspectives, with a fresh understanding of forgiveness and love.

She goes on to say “Shame is the emotion that says, not that you’ve made a mistake, but you *are* a mistake. Shame is correlated with addiction, with depression, with violence and suicide. Shame is often very destructive if unchecked in our lives.

What I was feeling in my opening illustration was shame. I felt like I never could measure up, that however much I prayed or didn’t pray, however much I tried to build relationships with people I was failing. I was sliding into depression and didn’t even know it.

But something happened; in God’s grace I began to develop relationships with colleagues who were willing to tell me the truth about myself, who were willing to be kind to me. These were people I didn’t always agree with. But their kindness helped me accept my finitude, helped me accept that I couldn’t be all things to all people.

Now, instead of shame I was free to feel something for more hopeful, “burning guilt,” “ah, I’m sorry, I spoke in a way that wasn’t helpful, yes, I do that sometimes, please forgive me.” Or “I find it difficult to do all the administrative tasks that I didn’t sign up for or that are not my strength and still be a spiritual presence with full awareness and strength; my bad but I’m not bad!”

I’m also more aware that I have the power, that all of us have the power to speak the truth in a way like my doctor did: by telling me the truth about my vocation he helped me confront shame and open more to healing guilt, to the possibility of change.

And, he helped me begin to offer this gift to others, the eucharistic possibilities of Christ’s presence in us and through us.

Our core ethic doesn’t come via a list, but opens its beauty as we sit at table, as we extend this soaring mountaintop vision into the unexpected help of someone who thinks we hate them. In Christ and through Christ, Amen.