

Sermon for Sunday August 31, 2025

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Given by Deacon Norah Fisher

Maybe you've heard the humorous story about the pastor who was having difficulty with his assigned parking space in the church parking lot. People parked in his spot whenever they pleased, even though there was a sign that clearly said, "This space reserved." He thought the sign needed to be more clear, so he had a different sign made, which read, "Reserved for Pastor Only." Still people ignored it and parked in his space whenever they felt like it. "Maybe the sign should be more forceful," he thought. So he devised a more intimidating one, which announced, "Thou shalt not park here." That sign didn't make any difference either. Finally, he hit upon the words that worked; in fact, nobody ever took his parking place again. The sign read, "The one who parks here preaches the sermon on Sunday morning!"

I tell you this story because most of you would probably hedge at the prospect of such a ministry: preaching the sermon on a Sunday morning. You would probably feel uncomfortable about doing that because of a lack of experience and training. But what, then, is your ministry? For you see, there are a variety of ministries in which all the people of a church can be involved. These ministries are based on various gifts we have as people. Saint Paul once made a list of these gifts when he talked about church people being involved in things such as preaching, teaching, administering, caretaking, praying, or even arbitrating.

Today's Gospel reading, as well as the other two readings selected for this Sunday, set before us a vision of a common ministry that all of us can be a part of. I would call it something like "the ministry of hospitality."

Let's begin by looking at this concept of hospitality. All of today's readings remind us not to set ourselves above other people. Whenever we gather together as the people of God, we ought to give place to one another. We ought to be hospitable. The reading from Proverbs says, "Do not exalt yourself ... do not claim a place...." In the Second Reading, the writer to the Hebrews encourages us, "Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so, some people have entertained angels

without knowing it." Finally, today's Gospel reading brings us the parable about the wedding guests. Jesus warns us that if you immediately claim a place of honor at such a gathering, you had better be prepared to experience some embarrassment when a more honored guest is ushered to your seat, and you are forced to take one of the undesirable spaces at the back of the hall. Then Jesus concludes by saying that if you want to be truly hospitable when you give a luncheon or dinner, you ought not invite your same old friends all the time but rather people who could never repay you, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Jesus is beginning to build a case here for the truth that there are no throwaways when it comes to human beings. Everybody is worthy of your attention and greeting. There is no one who doesn't deserve your hospitality and mine. In fact, Jesus suggests that you are taking a real chance when you slight certain people; you see, they might just turn out to be angels you did not know about! On the surface, this is a story about good social manners at a wedding. But its deeper purpose is to remind you and me in the family of God about our calling to be genuinely hospitable to one another. In the background looms the even brighter message about God's hospitality to each and every one of us (sinners that we are!), a hospitality which God showed us in the ministry of God's own blessed son, our Lord Jesus Christ. So, what is this ministry of hospitality?

To help us, let's look more closely at this word "hospitality. " Before we look at its literal meaning, we need to point out that there is a difference between hospitality and entertaining. A psychologist put it this way:

Hospitality must not be confused with entertaining...
Entertaining says, "Come to my house; admire my possessions; see the beautiful way the table is laid. Enjoy the scrumptious food that has taken me all week to prepare. See how perfectly neat and tidy and clean my house is. Come and listen to my views and thoughts."

Entertaining is hard, stressful, because through it we perpetuate the myth that we are perfect. We put up a facade saying that we manage our lives perfectly and that our children are perfectly disciplined and obedient.

Hospitality is totally different. We do not seek to portray a "perfect" image; people can love us in our weakness, relax with us, and enjoy our company.

An even deeper meaning of the word "hospitality" emerges when we realize that this word comes from the same source as two similar sounding words, "hospice" and "hospital. " The word "hospice" means "shelter" and the word "hospital" means "a place of healing." In this light, we can examine some of our own words and actions toward other people. Do my words and actions provide a shelter for other people when they are around me? Or, do my words and deeds promote a sense of healing for other people when they are around me? How hospitable am I, really?

For a moment, let us push the word "hospice" to its limits. We are aware that today the word "hospice" usually refers to a special kind of care or place meant for people who are dying. People with terminal illnesses receive hospice care.

In the church we need to remember, as we deal with one another—with fellow church members, with visitors, with other people from the community -- that there may be among us those who are dying! They are dying on the inside; for whatever reason, life is currently treating them harshly and they feel broken. Some are dying just to know someone; they have few, if any, friends. Some are dying to feel connected; they don't feel like they belong to the human race anymore. Some are dying to be affirmed; they are weary from feeling that they amount to nothing. Some are dying to be touched, even if only by eye contact, a smile or by some word of acknowledgment from another human being. All these people need hospice care; they need the hospitality of the church, because inwardly they are dying. They need a place of shelter, no matter how fleeting, where they can catch another breath of air to sustain them, lest they die.

There was a minister who had a favorite slogan that he often repeated in his sermons. He said, "The church is not like a country club; it's more like a hospital." That's what Jesus was saying here when he gave us the direction, "... do not invite your friends ... or your rich neighbors ... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind...." You and I are not in the church to

impress one another or to win power struggles; we are here to minister to one another in our weaknesses. We are here to be hospitable.

Now nobody can specifically tell you what your ministry of hospitality should consist of; we should never over-define such a highly personal ministry. But we must—each of us—define that ministry for ourselves.

To encourage us about this, let's look at the ministry of Jesus. In a way, we could call Christ's ministry to you and me a ministry of hospitality. Yes, that is what he showed us. The apostle Paul stated it in that singular sentence, "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Think of it, "yet sinners...." God did not withhold hospitality from us until we straightened ourselves out. While we were sinners, Christ was hospitable toward us by going to the cross and dying for us, in our place. Noticing our sin, Christ did not refuse to acknowledge us. He did not stop talking to us. He did not withhold information from us about God's love. No, in Christ, God made eye contact with us. The Word became flesh. The face of God now faced us. Looking into that face we felt sheltered and healed. Looking at his cross we know we are healed -- cleansed and forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ. The cross enables us to follow the divine model of hospitality.

Again, the apostle Paul encourages us toward such Christly hospitality when he writes to the Philippian Christians in chapter two of his letter, "Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... who humbled himself and took on the form of a servant and...became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." In this great passage, Paul reminds us how Jesus fulfilled the lesson of the parable we are considering in this Gospel reading. Christ, who is the first, became the last, so that we, the last, might be first, having all our sins washed away by his obedience at the cross.

So now, empowered by the cross of Christ, we each have our own ministry of hospitality. This ministry is more than showing good manners in public. It is a redemptive ministry, like Christ's, whereby we bring a sense of healing and genuine acceptance to all other people.

And we should get specific about our own ministry of hospitality. Perhaps, for instance, you have the gift of gab—the ability to talk at ease with just about

anyone. You could be an effective greeter to the strangers who visit your church. You could be that little spark of light to many longtime members of the parish to whom no one else seems to speak or give notice.

On the other side of the coin, you can be one of those church members who responds in a vital way when others greet you. Someone else takes the initiative and shows enough of a caring spirit to say "Good morning" to you, but sometimes all that can be observed in response is a faint grunt of acknowledgement or a slight tip of the head.

But out of this initial hospitality shown one another in the church hallways needs to blossom a deeper hospitality whereby people come to know that God loves them and cares for them too. In this regard, Christian hospitality always finally needs to involve some word of witness to God's love in Christ. This is another way of saying that Christian hospitality ultimately involves evangelism: speaking God's good word of love to another human soul. What could be more hospitable? How could we provide more of a sheltering spirit or speak a more healing word than to remind someone of the love of God in the cross of Jesus Christ? With this singular message on the lips of its members, the church does indeed rise above mere country club status and reveals itself as the glorious household of faith. As the old hymn puts it, "If you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, you can say he died for all." May God bless your ministry—your ministry of hospitality! Amen