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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 17 (Pentecost 12), Series C
Saturday, August 31st, 2019
Sunday, September 1st, 2019 (Labor Day Weekend)

Sermon: Holy Habits: Hospitality
Text: Hebrews 13:2; Luke 14:1-14

Focus: Jesus is the ultimate host, welcoming sinners into heaven and to his table.
Function: That they would show loving hospitality towards strangers and other believers.
Structure: Text-Application
Locus: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need” (SC, 5th Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2, ESV).¹ Generally, I don’t like having people over to my house. It’s not that I don’t like people. I would be more than happy to take you out for breakfast or meet up for a coffee or beer.

But it’s very difficult for me to stir up the motivation to invite people to my home. It just takes too much effort to host people. You have to clean the bathrooms, vacuum and mop the floors, dust the furniture, wash and put away all the dishes, plan a menu, shop for groceries, cook the meal, and hide all of your piles of stuff in the closet. This can be exhausting, especially if, the entire time that you’re cleaning, you have three tiny tornadoes following you around and undoing all your work: Hurricane Benjamin, Hurricane Michael, and Hurricane Rachel.

No matter how hard we try, our house always seems less than ideal for hosting people. Our kitchen is small. We don’t have a separate dining room. Our deck is too small for even a card table, and our backyard slopes downward. We often end up entertaining large groups in our

¹ Every Scripture reference, unless otherwise indicated, is from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

garage. So I feel embarrassed, almost as if I need to apologize for the lack of environmental standards. I don't want people to judge me, so I'd rather just not have them over.

But in today's epistle and Gospel readings, we discover that hospitality is an integral part of the Christian life. In Luke 14, Jesus finds himself as a dinner guest at someone's home, telling a parable about whom to invite to dinner parties (Luke 14:1-14). And in our epistle, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13:2). I don't know if I've ever had any angels over for dinner, but Abraham and Sarah certainly did, as you may recall from the Old Testament lesson a few weeks ago (Genesis 18). Three heavenly visitors showed up to deliver the promise that Sarah would bear a son, and the old couple served a meal of cheese curds and veal. Abraham's nephew Lot invited those same angels to spend the night in his house instead of camping in Sodom's town center (Genesis 19). After all, Sodom could be a little seedy after dark. Not until the fire and brimstone started raining down did Lot begin to suspect that, perhaps, his houseguests were more than mere mortals.

Yet even if your guest list doesn't have any angels on it, the Bible urges us to show hospitality to *all* people—especially our fellow believers. "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Rom. 12:13; cf. 1 Pet. 4:9). In fact, hospitality is such an important part of Christian life that the apostle Paul includes it among the requirements for those who wish to serve in the holy ministry (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8).

Hospitality is part in parcel of the Christian life. You might even say that it's one of those "holy habits," or spiritual disciplines, that I preached about earlier this summer. So what does hospitality really *mean*? In English, it often refers to friendliness. Or we may thank someone for their hospitality after they put on a great party. But in Greek, the literal meaning of

the word hospitality is “love for foreigners or strangers” (*philoskenia*). That’s significant for Christians, who are always aliens and strangers upon the earth (Phil. 3:20). The tradition of welcoming strangers is so important that throughout the history of Christianity, church buildings themselves were seen as sanctuaries for criminals, refugees, and asylum-seekers—off limits to the reach of the law.

Two years ago, a group from our church traveled to Germany and visited Trinity Lutheran Church in the western suburbs of Berlin. Pastor Gottfried Martens’s booming congregation is the fastest growing Lutheran church in Germany—and it’s full of refugees from Iran and Afghanistan. Very few Germans attend. As Christian converts, Trinity’s parishioners would face certain death if they were forced to return to their countries of origin. Yet some of them are illegal immigrants, so the church provides sanctuary. A few families even live 24/7 within the walls of the church building, unable to leave for fear of arrest and deportation. So they depend upon the hospitality of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to eat, sleep, and live in peace. The Bible says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” and the pastor and people of Trinity have taken this to heart.

When I was on vicarage in Des Moines, Iowa, I asked my supervising pastor about the main differences between rural, urban, and suburban ministry. During his ministry, Pastor Wolfram had served parishes in all three settings. In response to my question, he paused thoughtfully, then replied, “In rural congregations, the people will invite you into their *homes*. But in suburban and urban congregations, they will only take you out to lunch at a *restaurant*.” Perhaps this doesn’t sound like a profound difference, but think about it. In the case of the urban professionals and suburban soccer moms, people give you a slice of their time and attention by

taking you out to eat, which is very kind and generous—don't get me wrong! (*Aside:* As you can tell by looking at me sideways, I enjoy when people take me out to lunch!) But in the case of the farmers, by opening their homes and kitchens to you, they're really opening their hearts to you. They make themselves vulnerable and expose you to their lives. You can tell a lot about people by the kinds of furniture they own, the pictures or trophies that hang on the walls, the books and movies that line their shelves. So when people invite you to their home, they're inviting you into their life, which is the ultimate act of hospitality.

When Lisa and I got married, my best friend's parents gave us a cookbook with some of their best recipes. Laurie Hendrickson urged us to use our dinner table as a place to minister to others. On the title page she wrote:

“One of the most powerful ministries you can have is from your home. Whether it is appreciating existing volunteers or inviting someone to participate at a new level of leadership, the fact that you care enough to invite them into your home communicates volumes of the love of Christ.”²

When we bought our house in Castle Rock, the sellers turned out to be the son and daughter-in-law of another pastor in town. At the closing, they told us their prayer was for their former home to be a place of future ministry to others.

Hospitality was hugely important to Jesus, so it should matter also for us. Many of Jesus' parables feature invitations to celebrations or feasts. He was a frequent dinner guest. He blessed the wedding at Cana by his presence and first miracle, when he turned water into wine. He dined with Mary and Martha, as well as the Emmaus disciples (Luke 10:38-42; Luke 24:13ff). Jesus even invited himself to dinner at the home of sycophants like Zacchaeus the tax collector! No wonder his opponents grumbled about Jesus: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2, NIV). In the ancient world, sharing a meal was the most intimate thing that you

² Laurie Hendrickson, personal letter to author, November 2017.

could do with somebody besides going to bed with them. Sharing a meal implied full acceptance. And Jesus enjoyed meals with everyone, regardless of social status or religious background. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus even gives us the guest list:

“When you have a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you and you be repaid. But when *you* give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:12-14).

Our Lord Jesus knows whom to invite because he is the ultimate host. On the night of his betrayal, he told his disciples, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. At the Lord’s Table, he even welcomes sinners like us. For in the Lord’s Supper, Jesus is, at once, both meal and host, welcoming us to his Table to receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. “Take and eat,” Jesus says. “Take and drink.”

In the book of Revelation, there is a beatitude for all who enjoy Jesus’ hospitality: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9). Today Jesus invites you to come to him by faith and join him in a holy hospitality that will never end. Jesus is an extremely hospitable host. Maybe we should take a cue from our Lord.

It may have taken a while, but Lisa and I are finally taking a stab at this hospitality thing. Two summers ago, we hosted a neighborhood block party to “love on” the people on our street—to literally love our neighbors as ourselves. Then, beginning this past June, we’ve been hosting one dinner party per month in which we invite old friends and new friends to share a meal with us. (Once a month is about all we can handle with our busy schedule and energetic children!) Church members, new visitors, and our neighbors have gathered around our table to share food, laughter, and prayer. Not all of them are church-ed, and I think that’s a good thing. I spend so

much time with people in the church, as it is, that sometimes I need to work harder to reach out to those who don't yet have a church home or even a relationship with Jesus.

I still have a lot to learn about hospitality. Maybe you do too. This holy habit doesn't come easily to most of us. Yet some of you are actually so gifted at hospitality already, that I wonder if your spiritual discipline is actually a spiritual gift. Perhaps hospitality is at the intersection of two other spiritual gifts, where generosity meets mercy (cf. Rom. 12:8). Maybe you will invite my family to *your* house so we can meet at your table and learn better how to love one another. Even better: maybe you will invite someone surprising who may never have come up on your guest list ever before. And I will do the same. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.