



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Guest List

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

August 29, 2010

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

Hebrews 13:1-8; 15-16

Hebrews 13:1-8; 15&16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ...Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

The fourth act of Shakespeare's Henry V is the eve of the battle of Agincourt. In the play, the English troops had already besieged several towns and marched, day and night through a driving rain to reach the coast, only to find a formidable French army waiting. The French were well rested, well trained in the ways of war, and defending the honor of the French king on French land. Wet and exhausted, the English knew they were outnumbered and poorly equipped for a fight. A wise young leader, King Henry was still garnering the trust of this men. So as they awaited the break of day, Henry took advantage of the darkness, and, disguised by a common cloak, he circulated among the soldiers, seeking to learn what was on their minds; needing to assess their readiness for battle. There in the firelight, he discovered an abiding love for England, a loyalty for the crown and a deep devotion to him; but he also learned that despite their courage and devotion, many believed that the coming sunrise would be their last.

In a sense, King Henry was both host and guest in this unfolding drama. He had called them to serve, to fight, to leave home behind. And in donning the cloak of a guest, their fears held him into account; their loyalty moved him, challenging him to lead them well, even into what they anticipated was certain defeat. In the morning, as they gathered to meet the advancing French army, King Henry rallied the men with a rousing speech that both builds their courage *and* their community, a speech which concludes with these words:

*This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.* (Henry V, Act IV, Scene III)

Unbeknownst to the men Henry visited the night before, their honest words became the tools that allowed Henry to inspire their hearts for the battle at hand. Weary and ill prepared, in receiving Henry, they opened themselves to a message that would transform them into a band of brothers, strengthened by a common purpose.

The book of Hebrews as a whole is a bit mysterious to us, despite generations of study. It's called the Letter to the Hebrews – but it reads much more like a sermon when compared with the rest of the epistles in the New Testament. We don't know who wrote it with any certainty, though believe it was someone connected with the congregation to

whom it was addressed and the possible dating for its writing is pretty broad - most likely sometime between 60-100 A.D.

Yet, while we don't have much detail about Hebrew's origins, the teaching within it offers us a window into this late first century congregation – and also into our own.

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (13.2)*

The congregation who first heard these words had grown weary. They were tired of the work of being the church; tired of their efforts to resist the culture around them. People were no longer making worship a priority for gathering. Their motivation to serve, share, love and live faithfully had waned. It is in response to this congregation's lost energy and interest that Hebrews was written. With a heavy dose of theology, the writer takes the congregation back to the place that they first met the living Christ, committing their lives to the joys and service of the Lord.

In our passage today the author commends to the Hebrews the importance of community life and extending love to people in hard places. In a word, this is *hospitality* – a value of the ancient world we frequently see at work throughout Scripture. From Abraham and Sarah entertaining messengers from God, to the Widow and her son who were willing to give up their last bit of food to Elijah – hospitality was that fundamental value that guided their actions. They reached out to strangers, without concern for what would come back. Hospitality takes us to a level of engagement that is risky: the stranger may not be deserving of our hospitality – or worse, may take advantage of us; the prisoner's guilt may require a level of grace that we have yet to find within ourselves and love always asks something of us, with no guarantee of return.

As first century Christians, in a culture with different values, the stakes were high, for hospitality demanded not just reaching out, but telling and retelling the story of God's work in the world. The story that lifts up the power of Jesus' servant ministry and God's love for the people, though that love was rejected again and again. The story of how God enters even the darkest corners of life with grace and joy. And the story of the redemption of a broken and sinful world. The Hebrews were reminded them of the lengths and depths to which God had gone to gather them in. This story of God's love was not only the foundation *of* their life together but was the foundation *for* their life together as well.

The stakes are high for us as well. In many ways the church in our time struggles with the same issues that faced the early church. We don't live in a culture that supports what we do here. In fact, what we do here is often supplanted by our commitments in other places. For you it might be coaching soccer, or cheering a child through a swimming meet, for others it's Band Boosters, PTA or Book Clubs. We're taught from a young age to stay away from strangers, and more than once we've heard angry, hate-filled words

describe those who live in prison. After all, we rationalize – they *are* guilty. And as for love – it’s become a conditional commodity that bears little resemblance to what Jesus lived.

The messages we receive are clear: do what’s good for yourself and those who are important to you; steer clear of the *‘bad crowd’* and dabble in benevolent efforts when it’s convenient and affordable. And the fact is we can probably lead a pretty good life following those basic rules. We’ll have the respect of our peers and enjoy opportunities to experience life with friends and family. Playing it safe has its rewards.

The thing is, safety is not a goal of the gospel. Jesus taught the disciples to take up their cross to follow Him, leaving behind the ways of routine and comfort zones. *Hospitality, remembering, love* – these are familiar but powerful words which have become tame in our time. Hospitality is what we offer the friends we’ve invited over for dinner; remembering is what we do when we’ve left the list at home on the counter or pass the hours reminiscing with friends; and love is something we offer when we anticipate it will be returned.

Yet, we need to ask ourselves what it means to do these things in the context of a faith which confesses God has saved us. We need to consider how our present lives are a gift from God. But for God, we are prisoners of sin, unloved and forgotten. And by present lives we’re not talking about the house, the car, the job or our good health. Rather, present lives means *to* whom we belong, *through* whom we experience joy and *for* whom our lives are a song of thanksgiving and praise.

Perhaps one of the best places to understand what it means to remember and to love and to be venues of hospitality, is the Lord’s Table. Recall the words we share when we are at table together, breaking bread and pouring wine:

Take. Eat.

*This is my body, broken for you,
do this in remembrance of me.*

We eat the bread and drink the wine and in so doing, we receive the Lord - and we are changed.

To remember a prisoner or one who is being tortured, to extend hospitality and love to a stranger, receiving the gift of that life as if we were walking right beside them, are ways in which we move away from *doing* church toward *being* the body of Christ. And the thing is, as Hebrews tells us without intending to, we get something in return. In Henry V, the king’s incognito meeting with the troops and their frank discourse yielded a level of camaraderie that helped win the battle.

When we offer the best of who we are to another we come face to face not only with who they are, but who we are through the love of God. We discover the power of

that love when we are able to sit with a stranger, a victim, a prisoner or someone who can't seem to pull things together. God doesn't give up on us when we've gone astray; we're called to extend the same level of grace – to take the risks that demonstrate not just charity or interest – but reception. Let us pray,

God of grace,

It is far easier to understand your love for the people we read about in our Bibles, than it is to put your love in place in our lives. Give us the strength of faith that would receive a stranger, wherever they are, as you have received us. We pray through Christ, Amen.