

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

June 29, 2008

Welcome

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

3 John 1:1-11; Matthew 10:40-42

Sometimes we open our Bibles, and from the scenes described, we know instantly that we are looking at a radically different time, place, and culture. The Old Testament describes the actions of a nomadic people wandering in the desert wastes of the Sinai Peninsula or details from life in Solomon's palace where he kept a thousand wives. We read those stories with a certain awe: how different is the world of the Bible than our own! Even when we come to the New Testament, much of Jesus' teaching has to do with the agrarian world in which he lives. His parables are populated with farmers and shepherds, field hands and fishermen, not the kinds of people we encounter day to day. We have to imagine a life much different than our own in order to interpret both what is happening in the Biblical narrative and to figure out how it applies to our own lives.

There are, however, certain parts of the Biblical narrative in which we feel that we are on more familiar turf. Jesus welcomes the little children, and we can just imagine our savior right here in our own town, perhaps sitting on a park bench and being approached by some young folk who are drawn to his sincere goodness. And, even that sharper side of Jesus, confronting the powerful of his day: we understand what a prophet sounds like, and we can imagine the critiques that he would have for the arrogant or the self-interested or the selfish rich persons of our own time.

But here is a word of warning: even those situations and sayings within scripture which seem to share a common vocabulary and setting with our own day may differ more than we think. When Jesus, or Paul, teach about love, for instance, we've got to acknowledge that what they describe is a far cry from the common uses of the term in our culture. The love of God for God's people does not correlate with the kind of love explored in a thirty-minute sitcom. The love within the community of faith does not match up with the steamy love scenes of a Romance novel. The sacrificial love of our Savior bears no resemblance to the desires exploited by advertisers who encourage us to love a particular brand of coffee or ice cream. We use the word "love" in a variety of contexts, many of which are completely foreign to senses of the word employed in the Bible.

Here is another term that has a deeply diminished meaning in our culture: hospitality. Jesus himself would scarcely recognize the things we call "hospitality" as having much to do with hospitality at all.

We have a "hospitality" industry with hotels and motels, bars and restaurants, convention centers and resort accommodations. In the ancient world, hospitality was a practice of the household or home. Let me add quickly, that even the word "home" in their world bears little resemblance to our modern homes, a point I will need to explain later.

In the time of Jesus, strangers were received in the home. It is true that inns or lodges for travelers existed in those days, but most travelers would have sought a resting place at night in a home in some village along their route. In fact, in Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus, the word translated *Inn* is "kataluma," better rendered as "guest room." Mary laid Jesus in the manger, because there was no space for them in the guest room. The host, whoever that might have been, was overwhelmed by many visitors who filled kataluma. The mother and her baby were offered a

place of relative quiet, and a bit more privacy near where the animals were kept. The same word shows up later in Luke when Jesus sends his disciples to look for a place to share the Passover meal with them. They find the guest room, or upper room — kataluma — in which the Last Supper takes place. It is a room in someone's home.

And not just a house in the modern sense of the word: a suburban ranch house for 2.4 people. A home in the ancient world was a household, including many people across generations, members of the extended family, various dependants, servants, artisans, and others. The ancient family looked a lot different than ours. So did the ancient home. Indeed, located there were many important activities which for us take place in large institutions. Home was the site for economic production, education, care for the young and old, and mourning, just to name a few.

These kinds of families and households are now largely extinct, eliminated by the relentless pressures of a modern, capitalist, and urbanized economy. You cannot have a mobile and efficient workforce, economically speaking, if people are rooted to their families and bonded to a particular place and people. Yet, the many functions that used to be performed within the household still must be done, and to no surprise, we have found capitalist solutions to this challenge. We hire people to do what families used to do themselves. We send our children to a group of specialists to be educated. We hand over our elderly to be cared for by someone else. Our practice of hospitality has been shrunk down to occasional entertaining of friends. After all, in order to provide hospitality, someone has to be home, and we rarely are, because we are out there earning a living, getting educated, or being entertained. The home has become a very private space to which we retire when we're through with everything else. Sometimes it is a lonely place, too.

The trends I am describing are not altogether new. In the eighteenth century, the poet Samuel Johnson wrote, “In a commercial country, a busy country, time becomes precious, and . . . hospitality is not so much valued.” A few centuries before that, John Calvin, the father of our tradition, lamented the demise of hospitality and how, in his sixteenth century, even the churches were abandoning their traditional role of providing a haven for outsiders. He wrote, “This office of humanity has . . . nearly ceased to be properly observed among men, for the ancient hospitality celebrated in histories, is unknown to us, and inns now supply the place of accommodations for strangers.” I have drawn both of these quotes from an excellent contemporary treatment of the topic by Christine Pohl (*Making Room*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 36).

None of this means that the ancient world and its practices were less complex than our own. The same thing can be said of some traditional societies that persist in our own day. Making space for the stranger has never been a simple task. However, in the ancient world, there were a host of social conventions that allowed families to fulfill their obligations to those most vulnerable: the poor, the sick, the traveler, the stranger.

It is that system which is the background for Jesus’ instructions to followers whom he sends forth. It is that system which enabled the growth of the church from its inception and the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman empire and beyond.

Matthew records how Jesus sent the twelve on a mission of healing and preaching. They had to stay somewhere, and Jesus had told them not to bring any money. They had to eat something, and Jesus had told them not to pack a lunch. They depended upon the kindness of strangers. And, though they may have preached in a village square or entered the synagogues to share the word, their most effective witness was most likely in homes where they went to heal

and pray and share in conversation with their hosts. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus said, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

The church depended upon the kindness of strangers, and so the church has always felt a deep obligation to be kind to the strangers who come into our midst. It doesn't matter if they are poor. It doesn't matter if they are sick. It doesn't matter if they are lonely. It doesn't matter if they have had to flee as refugees from another place. We have wanted for them to have a home among us.

So it is those particular ministries of our own congregation which feed the hungry, house the homeless, or provide clothing for those unable to provide it for themselves, these are an expression of our desire to provide the same kind of welcome to others which has given life to us.

There are other ways that we practice the most rudimentary forms of hospitality: joining in a pot-luck meal as we will next month. Sharing lemonade after a summertime service. Welcoming each other to worship. There is no worse thing than not being welcomed.

Have any of you failed to receive a welcome from a church? I have. It's never happened to me when I've been traveling abroad. It's never happened to me when I've gone to a black church or a Hispanic church or a church in the inner city. But it has happened to me in a white, suburban church.

We are precisely the kind of church, located in the kind of community that sometimes has trouble offering a welcome to the stranger.

In the Hinsdale paper, there were reports recently of several similar incidents. In one of these, two Hispanic men in a van motioned for a young person walking down the sidewalk to come towards their vehicle. The young person ran home, told his/her mother what had happened.

She called the police, and the incident ended up in the paper, classified as a disorderly conduct report. The suspects were not apprehended. I assume from the surface details of the story that the men were lost and looking for directions. That is why they waved to the child. Turning that into a police episode betrays an uncommon concern, if not hostility, toward an outsider.

Are strangers dangerous? They can be. But they can also be a great blessing. That is another reason we can all be happy about having the church. We are in a space in which it is safe to encounter strangers. Not just nod to them, but to talk to them, learn about them. Learn from them, even as they learn about us and learn from us.

One of the desert fathers from long ago said, “We always treat guests as angels—just in case.”

That is a tall order, but an ideal we can pursue together. Why not try it out this morning? Welcome one another. Pick out someone you do not know and welcome them this Sunday and every Sunday. Simply welcome them to our church. I have one word of advice. When someone else welcomes you, never say to them, “Well, I’ve been a member of the church for thirty years!” If that is the case (and it well could be), simply smile back at them and say, “Thank you, and may I welcome you, too?”

“Let us welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us.”

Amen.