

Feed us, Lord, for we are hungry for Your Word. Amen.

Who had a great time at our outdoor service in Port Tobacco last week,
and our wonderful picnic afterward.
It wasn’t too hot; bugs weren’t biting; I only had one little twinge:
Looking around at lunchtime nearly every table was all Wayside or all La Plata.
Only one table was half and half of each.
What was that Jesus said about only sitting with the people we know well?

*Then Jesus said, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends,
your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors... “*
The writer to the Hebrews said, *“Do not forget to entertain strangers,
for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.*

It’s human nature to stay close to people we know, to we pick and choose
who we want to sit with, who we like and who we don’t,
who we’ll date and who we won’t, who we’ll hire and who we won’t.
We structure our lives and build our security by deciding who’s in and who’s out.
It’s one way we cope in a complex world – we need filters.
And when we get over-attached to our filters, ranking can become manipulative,
rating can turn into discrimination – and we cut ourselves off from God’s grace.

Jesus invites us to develop different filters. He’s not writing an etiquette column,
he’s telling us how things are to be for those who would be his followers,
which is almost never like things are in human terms.

The Good News Jesus taught and lived invites us to live out of our
supernatural human tendencies, not natural ones.
In the God-life, what he called the kingdom life, the rules are different.
*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame,
the blind, and you will be blessed.*

The people we should honor most are the ones who can do little for us,
people on the margins – in Jesus’ day the poor, the crippled, lame and blind
were valued very little; they could do nothing for you, socially or otherwise.

My church in Stamford, Connecticut was small, ten miles from downtown.
and not in an area where people would drop in. It was hard to grow.

But I did monthly services in nursing homes, and some people there said that if someone would pick them up, they'd love to come to church on Sundays. So we started arranging rides at one, two, sometimes three nursing homes. And we started a doing ministry among people who were homeless and staying in the city's shelters – and some of them started to come to church occasionally, if we picked them up. Our numbers started to pick up too.

At first I was, yeah, but these are people with a lot of needs – and one, whom I learned had early onset Alzheimer's, talks with food in her mouth at coffee hour... At one point I said to a colleague that we were getting an awful lot of the "crippled and the lame," and he said, "You named your church *Christ the Healer* – what did you expect?"

I was looking at needs, not at the gifts our new members had to offer. And they had gifts. One of the shelter guys joined our music team. One person who identified as mentally ill was an anchor of our healing prayer ministry. I saw the care which parishioners felt for the people we picked up, making sure they weren't left out, bringing people food at coffee hour. And the one who talked with food in her mouth – whenever I asked people to speak in church about where they last sensed the presence of God, she spoke of her faith and gratitude to God with such eloquence and power, it was like a different, undamaged part of her brain was activated.

I realized that the people who hung around with Jesus weren't all that "put together" in worldly terms either. People who don't "have it all together" are often much more aware of their need for God, and they remind the rest of us, who aren't that "put together" either." This is the Realm of God, my friends, a place where everybody counts, whatever their deficits, whatever their resources.

When we look at ourselves from God's perspective, we're not so much better than everyone else. We don't need to rank people as better or worse, "in" or "out." As we see other people, even strangers, even sinners, as equally loved by God – I once heard Bishop Desmond Tutu say with a giggle, "It's a pity God's standards are so low, he even loves us," – as we take that in, we can allow God's love to flow through us to them. That's how we live out this outrageous Kingdom life Jesus invites us into.

Christ Church is enjoying new life with new people coming in,
 bringing their gifts and their needs. It is so wonderful when people find us.
 What if we also went out looking for those at the margins, inviting people from the
 highways and byways, from the gym and Facebook groups and carpool,
 from the woods behind Walmart and the Van-Go park-and-ride?
 We have a huge homeless population in Charles County – how might we reach out
 with God’s love to invite families and young adults to this table?
 Not because they have needs, but because they have gifts to share,
 as we have gifts to share?

This enterprise we call “church” is one big practice session for God’s heavenly
 banquet. We come together, all sorts of people around the world, and we
 gather at the table to which God has invited us, at which there are no bad seats.
*I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free
 In awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me.
 I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed,
 the new community of love in Christ's communion bread.*

At that heavenly banquet, we will feast and laugh together, with all kinds
 of people we probably wouldn’t want to be seen dead with in this life.
 Those are exactly the people we will be seen dead with!
 but not so much dead; more alive than we’ve ever been.
 Can we allow the Spirit of God to adjust our filters of who’s acceptable to us?
 Expand our capacity to love those who right now we consider unlovable?
 Can you think of someone in that category right now, and ask God to bless them?
*As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends.
 The love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends.*

At that table, we’ll love everybody the same, not our loved ones more.
 In the presence of Perfect Love, how can there be “less love” and “more love?”
 We will be all love – so we might as well start living into that future now.
 We borrow from that future. We bring that future into the here and now.
 That is what living by faith means: to live into the future God has promised,
 which Jesus told us is already. Not just then and later – here and now.
*And thus with joy we meet our Lord, his presence always near
 Is in such friendship better known; we’ll see and praise him here*

Amen.

Luke 14:1,7-14

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee,
he was being carefully watched.

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table,
he told them this parable:

"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor,
for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you,
'Give this man your seat.'

Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.

But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes,
he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.'

Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner,
do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors;
if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,
and you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Keep on loving each other as brothers.

Do not forget to entertain strangers,

for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners,

and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure,

for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have,

Because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

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.