

12th Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 17C

August 31, 2025

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

God's A-List

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



In our lesson from the 13th chapter of Hebrews, we are encouraged to:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:1-2).

A more precise translation of the original Greek text would be: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to ‘the strange.’” English definitions of the word “strange” include: unusual, extraordinary, odd, curious, queer... Strange can also mean, “estranged, alienated, originating from the outside, unfamiliar.” The word “strange” is evocative. At its best, the word “strange” can pique curiosity and even creativity. At its worst, the word can trigger impulses to judge and exclude. Our faith teaches us to show hospitality in welcoming those we may never have encountered before. Our faith encourages us to extend the invitation to those who challenge us in the margins of our comfort zones. Such welcome invites us to use our imaginations... in order to get a compassionate feel for what a stranger in our midst might be experiencing. Even better, we can go to places where **we** are deemed to be a strange outsider... that we may know the experience first-hand. We are to welcome those who challenge our own sense of comfort and familiarity, those whose experiences are very different from our own... those whose voices are too often drowned out by louder voices.

Jesus was not known for having refined table manners. In fact, a dinner with Jesus might well include surprises and sometimes outright provocation. Jesus teaches us to be open to the challenge of identifying with someone who seems “strange”... who is very different from ourselves... be they different physically, mentally, emotionally, culturally, politically, or different from us in gender or sexual orientation. The list is long because, in essence, no two people are absolutely identical, even twins. On a spectrum from “somewhat different” to “radically different,” we all share the label of being “strange” to someone. To understand this large idea of “difference,” we are called

to move from a “me-centric” perspective... that focuses on the division between “me and you” ... and shift to an “I and thou” relationship as the great rabbi Martin Buber described it... focusing on the space between two people... a liminal, sacred place of meeting in which God invites us into relationship with one another.

In our gospel lesson, we hear that a leader of the Pharisees has invited Jesus to a sabbath meal. Because of Jesus’ reputation for being a guest who does not shy away from confrontation, we can only imagine that the host experienced some trepidation about the unpredictable guest. We can imagine, too, the whispering and the head turning that occurred as Jesus entered the room. Just as the guests were observing Jesus, Jesus, who was a keen observer of human dynamics, read the room. He noticed how the guests gravitated toward the head of the table in the time-honored ritual of claiming places of status and prestige. The guests wanted to be seated in the “right” place next to the “right” people. But Jesus had a *different* take on who the “right” people are. For Jesus, the people of greatest value were not the ones whose egos filled the room. In fact, Jesus’ ranking of importance was the polar opposite... a full reversal. Jesus teaches that the reign of God is upside down and inside out from the way we tend to view the world. As we reflected together in Thursday morning worship a couple of weeks ago, the Gospel invites us to see the world anew... as if we were standing on our heads. Jesus proclaims such a reversal as he seeks to lift-up and prioritize those who are marginalized... stigmatized... judged... deemed worthless... deemed strange. The message that Jesus came to bring us is a total reordering, a sacred reversal that shakes-up conventional norms: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus encourages his hearers to step out of comfortable patterns... release the desire to get to the head of the table... and to lay down any compulsion to dominate, seize control, and get their own stubborn way. God’s “A-list” includes the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the differently-abled, the homeless, the addicted, the refugee... and the list goes on and on. The invitation, the hospitality that we are to extend is to be done without a shred of hope of getting anything in return. We are to extend hospitality without expecting to hear more coins dropping into the offering plate... or any promise that a guest will return again... or that even a simple, “thank you, I am glad to be here” will be uttered. Pay attention to those who the world often forgets, and who will not be able to repay in any way. Pay attention and welcome the strange... and the blessings promise to be abundant. The proud... who claim their identities in titles, fat bank accounts, possessions, and their connections to the “right” people... are to find their true identities and wealth by giving up their comfortable seats at the table. God’s seating arrangement humbles, levels, lifts, and exalts. The heavenly re-ordering promises abundance in ways we can only know once we have given up our precious seat... and head towards the margins of our comfort zones.

To help illustrate Jesus’ lesson, I would like to share a favorite story of mine. Many of you know the work of the late spiritual writer Henri Nouwen. Some of his most well-known books are *The Wounded Healer*, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, and *Life of the Beloved*. All of Nouwen’s writings are rich with spiritual insight.

Nouwen was a Dutch-born priest and professor who had taught at Ivy League colleges. There came a point in his life when Nouwen decided that he needed to switch gears. And so... he left his prestigious teaching position at Yale to move to Canada, to live in a group home of the mentally challenged and differently gifted... a community known as L’Arche. In English, “L’Arche” is translated “The Ark.” It was founded in the 1960’s by Jean Vanier who was a Canadian Catholic social philosopher. L’Arche is now a world-wide movement offering a model of community in which

residents and their helpers live together. Today, there are over 150 L'Arche communities located on five continents... in countries ranging from Argentina to Zimbabwe. Helpers are not simply paid employees who leave work and the end of their shifts. They are friends and companions to the residents who live together... creating a community where residents can fully be themselves and live their best lives... just as they are. In this model, there is no strong delineation between resident and helper.

Nouwen writes beautifully about his experience of living in a L'Arche community. He relished the sense of belonging in a chosen family. I was particularly struck by a story Nouwen shared about a young man named Trevor. Like many of the residents of the community, Trevor, with his many challenges, was ever-warm and engaging. Trevor joyfully shared his affection with others... and never missed an opportunity to greet his friend Henri. It became concerning when Trevor seemed to become more and more withdrawn. He was no longer his old, outgoing self. And so, Trevor was sent away to a psychiatric facility for evaluations and more professional assistance.

After some time had passed, Nouwen decided that he would pay Trevor a visit at the psychiatric hospital, so he phoned ahead to make arrangements. When a representative of the staff learned that the renowned Henri Nouwen was going to be visiting their facility, Nouwen was invited to a special luncheon to be given in his honor. The luncheon became quite the event... to be held in the Golden Room and attended by local physicians and members of clergy.

When Nouwen arrived, he was greeted and ushered directly to the Golden Room. As he looked around the room, Nouwen saw no sign of his friend Trevor. When Nouwen inquired as to the whereabouts of his friend, he was informed that Trevor would not be coming to the lunch... as patients and staff are not allowed to dine together. Plus, he was told, "no patient has ever eaten in the Golden Room."

Nouwen who by nature was meek, mild, and non-confrontational, was disturbed by the pronouncement. "Trevor ought to be here!" he thought. Nouwen sought out someone who appeared to have some authority and said, "the whole purpose of my coming here was to have lunch with Trevor. If Trevor is not allowed to attend the lunch, I will not attend either." Needless-to-say, a way was quickly found for Trevor to join Nouwen and the other guests... in the Golden Room... for lunch.

In the course of the luncheon, Nouwen lost sight of Trevor. As he scanned the room, Nouwen eventually spotted the young man. Standing in a corner with a glass of Coca Cola in his hand, Trevor boldly stepped forward and said: "A toast. I will now offer a toast." The room fell silent. Folks got nervous. What was this young man... this psychiatric patient... going to do? What was he going to say? In a room full of "recognized professionals", Trevor lifted up his glass of Coca Cola and began to sing: "If you're happy and you know it, raise your glass!" Guests were stunned. They didn't know what to do. Trevor was beaming. He knew nothing of the conventional pecking order. He simply knew that he belonged at this very special event for his friend Henri. Very slowly, as Trevor kept on singing... others in the room began to join in. As the chorus grew, the spirit and the volume increased until guests were practically shouting, "If you're happy and you know it, if you're happy and know it, if you're happy and you know it raise your glass!"

When travelling for speaking engagements, it became Nouwen's practice to bring one or more members of his community along with him. When on stage, Nouwen always had companions alongside him. His was a simple witness to the kind of true kinship and community that Jesus taught about... an invitation to loosen our grip on the way we think things should be, and to welcome the deeper blessings of fellowship and community into which we are called.

For today, we sit with image of the kind of party Jesus would throw as we live into a new moment in this community of faith. This is a moment that invites us to continue the work of reflecting and growing... as we... with glad hearts... continue to roll out the carpet of welcome that leads to the feast of life.

Amen...