

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 29, 2010 (Proper 17, Year C)

When I was growing up, every Thanksgiving dinner at our house always included an unexpected guest. My mother insisted on inviting at least one person who had nowhere else to go. Sometimes it was someone we knew – like an elderly friend of my parents who talked too much – and occasionally it was a perfect stranger; at least to me and my brother – like some lonely soul my mother befriended who had just moved to town and didn't have any nearby family. Looking back, this was a kind gesture of Christian hospitality; a way of living out that wonderful line we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.” But it drove me nuts.

While my mother was intent on “entertaining angels unawares,” all I wanted was to be enveloped in the family cocoon. I didn't want some stranger piercing the bubble of comfort food, relaxed conversation, and contentedly watching football with a full belly. And I mean that both metaphorically – so that I could just relax and be myself; and physically – it's harder to get away with slouching when a stranger is sitting across from you at the dinner table. It, frankly, felt like a home invasion. Like having a traditional Christmas card taken with mom, dad, the two boys, the dog, and some guy named Ed.

Most of us don't like outsiders crashing our parties or our holiday celebrations. Yet this morning Jesus offers us some strange party planning advice: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner,” he says, “do not invite your friends or your relatives or rich neighbors...but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” And, let's be honest, that guest list sounds like a recipe for a pretty lousy party. So what's Jesus talking about?

Well, he's not telling us to neglect our friends and relatives; to never again invite them over for a barbecue. But he *is* warning us against becoming too comfortable in our interpersonal relationships. Because to neglect the stranger is to neglect God. To avoid the outcast is to avoid God. To ignore those who are different from us is to ignore God.

But it sure is tempting. Most of us do everything we can to avoid bringing strangers, let alone poor ones, into our lives. Conscious or not we do all we can to keep strangers and the “riff raff” at a safe distance. Just take a look at a map: we sort by socio-economics and race and class and religion and education level. When we talk about people living on “the other side of the tracks” in many cases the “tracks” may as well be the Berlin Wall. We like our self-imposed barriers; they make us feel self-important

Which brings us to all of Jesus' talk about the norms of banquet seating in ancient Palestine and the importance of humility. The whole notion of not grabbing the place of honor but waiting to be invited into it may sound strange to our ears but so does the whole notion of humbling ourselves. Our culture forces certain people to be humble in the face of power – precisely those

whom Jesus encourages us to invite over for dinner. Yet Jesus tells us to humble ourselves. He says, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Which echoes that other famous line that “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” This may sound a resonant note of hope for the poor and the oppressed and the downtrodden. But what about us? Upper middle class folks are not so good at humility; in the outward game of life we tend to wind up closer to first than to last. We tend to be exalted rather than humbled. And we like it that way.

Humility is not our great strength; not as Americans on the global scene, not as people living on the South Shore. Yet Jesus charges us to humble ourselves before God knowing full well that this is a great spiritual challenge. And it leads to some important questions. How do we live lives of Christian humility when humility is seen as a detriment rather than a virtue? Finishing last is reserved for “losers” and those who can’t compete in the world. What does it look like to be outwardly and culturally “successful” while still living a life of Christian humility? Can it even be done?

Well, the answer to that last question is “yes.” Having worldly resources doesn’t mean that you cannot live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. It can be a special challenge but it can be done if you embrace the radical inclusivity and hospitality and humility of our Lord. That means looking beyond the banquet seating charts and the norms of social status to view every single person we encounter in this life for what they truly are: a fellow child of God. Regardless of who we are or what we do or what we have or what we lack, that is our chief identity in this world. And seeing one another in this light is a challenge for all of us.

It means living by God’s social registry rather than our own. A place where everyone is listed in God’s “Who’s Who,” not just the rich and famous. And that is a radical notion because it wipes out all of our preconceived notions of who’s in and who’s out; who’s a have and who’s a have-not; who matters and who is inconsequential. Because in God’s social network everyone is in, everyone counts, everyone matters. Which takes all of us who thought we might be just a bit better than much of the population, down a couple of notches. And that can be a tough blow.

Years ago, when we were first married, my mother gave me and Bryna an old framed piece of art with two angels facing one another and holding a scroll with that verse from Hebrews about entertaining angels unawares and the importance of showing hospitality to strangers. And for the past 15 years, wherever we’ve lived, it has hung right next to the front door as a constant reminder about the need to offer hospitality to strangers. I often walk right by it. But every so often I take a moment to re-read the inscription. And I find that for me it’s an important reminder of how we are called to live out the gospel each and every day.