

Pentecost 4A (7/2/17)

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus turns our understanding of hospitality on its head. It's not the size of the gesture that matters most, but the motivation. God's gracious welcome establishes a pattern for our own hospitality, turning our attention toward the "little ones," and thus, toward Christ himself. Every moment presents an opportunity to discover Christ in our midst and welcome him. And, this is all the reward we need.

[Excerpt from F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 39-41]

That is some kind of hospitality. What better way to kick off our Independence Day celebrations than to revisit a classic scene of summer revelry in America? Literature fans will recognize this passage from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a tale of excess and tragedy in 1920s New York, and a contender for the title of "Great American Novel." The narrator, Nick Carraway, is a new arrival to the East Coast, just getting started in his career in the bond business. He rents a small house on Long Island next door to a palatial estate owned by the elusive Jay Gatsby. Nick quickly learns that his neighbor is renowned for his lavish parties, regular gatherings of New York's social and economic elite. The rich and fashionable rub elbows from morning until late into the night at Gatsby's mansion, saturated with the pleasures of wealth in the Roaring Twenties.

The extravagance of this sort of hospitality, however, is contrasted with the life of the working poor, on whose backs the nouveau riche have built their fortunes. Scenes of an industrial wasteland appear momentarily in the novel,¹ reminding us that for all the carousing at Long Island mansions, life for the majority of Americans is hard.

Oh, but wouldn't we like to see one of those parties? Think of the memorable celebrations in your own life, the wedding receptions and holiday parties and formal affairs. Think of the delicious food and drink, the interesting company, the décor and music. **Think of the thrill of belonging, of being swept up into a care-free crowd. This kind of event is the height of hospitality, isn't it?**

Or is it? As we reflect on what it means to provide a warm welcome, consider Jesus' words to his disciples in our Gospel from Matthew today:

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

Not quite the definition of hospitality we've been working with. **There's no mention of abundance, no frivolity, no in-crowd. Just a cup of cold water for one of the "little ones." That, Jesus insists, constitutes true hospitality.**

Thus, he turns our understanding of hospitality on its head. Apparently, **it's not the nature of the gesture itself that matters most, but the**

¹ See 23.

motivation. When we think of welcoming others, we tend to think of the cleanliness of the space, the ambiance, the meal, the guest list. **Rarely do we think of the one without an invitation. But Jesus reorients us toward “the little ones,” the most vulnerable in our midst, those whose needs are more basic.**

This is consistent with his vision of the reign of God throughout the Gospels. “When you give a luncheon or a dinner,” he advises the aspiring party planner,

do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the [just].²

Have you heard of the Turkish newlyweds who celebrated their marriage in 2015 by inviting 4,000 Syrian refugees to eat with them? “I was shocked,” said the bride, “when [my fiancé] first told me about the idea, but afterwards I was won over by it. ...I’m happy that we had the opportunity to share our wedding meal with the people who are in real need.”³ This is a remarkable example, yet “whoever gives *even a cup of cold water* to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

The model of true hospitality, of course, is God. God has welcomed us into the fullness of grace in spite of our own small stature. “...the free gift of

² Luke 14:12-14.

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11783353/Meet-the-Turkish-couple-who-spent-their-wedding-day-feeding-4000-Syrian-refugees.html>.

God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” Paul rejoices in our second reading today. **Who are we that the Lord would invite us to his table with the promise of divine mercy and abundant life? And yet, he does. So, God’s gracious welcome establishes a pattern for our own hospitality, turning our attention toward the “little ones,” and thus, toward Christ himself.** “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” he says.

Dear church, the promise of today’s Gospel is that, large or small, our gestures of genuine hospitality “reverberate with cosmic significance,” to borrow the words of David Lose.⁴ Even a cup of cold water for a thirsty guest, even a simple midday meal for a child in the Puyallup Valley, even a brief moment sharing the grief of a friend, even a kind word to a person living on the street, even a smile and an extra measure of grace for an unexpected visitor to church – these are the ingredients of the life God envisions for us. **Every moment presents an opportunity to discover Christ in our midst and welcome him.** And, this is all the reward we need.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/06/pentecost-4-a-even/>.