

## Sermon Let Mutual Love Continue Hebrews 13 and Luke 14. 2022

Writing to the Hebrews less than 70 years after Jesus' death, St Paul is doing his best to encourage them to persevere in their Christian faith in the face of persecution from the Roman authorities. As they were tempted to revert to Judaism, which was safer, the theme of this epistle is Christ's role as mediator between God and humanity. Today's excerpt begins *Let mutual love continue*, and ends *Do not neglect to do good and share what you have*.

And it follows what Jesus had been teaching in the gospel reading today from Luke. Now it's noticeable that there are more references to eating, banquets, and being at table in Luke, than in any other gospel. And here Jesus is at table in a Pharisee's house with a large group of people, and teaching while everyone eats. Remember Jesus and the Pharisees were forever sparring and conflicting about religious laws. Why was Jesus even at this gathering? But He was, and He's using the occasion to proclaim what prevails in the Kingdom of God. And this was provocative and radical, because we need to remember the social system that was in place at the time. Jewish Palestine, subsumed into the Roman Empire, was governed by the Roman class structure, and driven by conspicuous social climbing.

But Jesus has a different idea for the way things ought to work, and in this account Luke records a turning expectations upside down, as Jesus watched the guests at this Pharisee's house jockeying for good positions to be seated at the table.

Remember He says the prophets told us what the Lord requires of you: justice, kindness and to walk humbly with your God. Surely the people at the table belonged to God, not Rome, and self-promotion instilled in Roman culture did not sit well with their identity as children of Israel.

Jesus was telling the guests at this feast, "Instead of seeking glory for yourself, spend your time and energy giving glory to God."

We can only wonder why Jesus' Pharisee host had invited Him, but Jesus seized the opportunity to confront him and his hospitality:

*You're inviting the wrong people, Jesus told him. By including only friends, family, and those who can advance your status, you are no better than these guests who are fighting over the best seat in the house. You're trying to make yourself look good by surrounding yourself with "important" people, while you ignore the ones who should be enjoying your hospitality.*

He wanted to urge them toward true generosity, real hospitality that expected nothing in return, people who would never be the natural choice, people who could never return the favor. Removing the *us and them* barriers and treating others as equals is only the first step toward becoming equal as joint-heirs in the family of God.. Even treating others as if they were our equals is not enough. Only true humility can give us the right perspective.

Do we ever think we need to prove ourselves as good Christians by doing more and more? Actually though, we don't *need* to justify ourselves before God – he has already justified us through the death and resurrection of his Son.

Jesus says, don't try to impress anyone with your righteousness. The only one whose opinion of you matters is God, and he knows your heart. He knows how far short of his righteousness you really fall. And he loves you anyway.

If we accept Christ's invitation to join him at table in the Kingdom of God we must understand we are only there by grace. We don't *deserve* such grace, and we aren't any better than anyone else because of it. But from that humble place the promise is we will be invited to sit with Jesus. We might wonder if this story of Jesus got through to those present or they were too socially conditioned to hear it.....

The Pharisees thought they were the elite in God's kingdom, and surely they deserved the best seats at God's table. They had developed an attitude of superiority and entitlement. So what of the others there? They might not look religious, and they might not have all the right table manners, and they might not wear the best clothes or live in the best parts of the city, but Jesus' point was, they are invited to God's banquet as well.

In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Jem Finch, Scout's brother, invites Walter Cunningham home for lunch as he's too poor to afford it himself. It's Walter's dad who leads the lynch mob hounding Robinson, an African American who is accused of assaulting a white woman, and who Atticus Finch has the responsibility of defending.

The Finches beloved cook "Cal" serves food to Walter, and he promptly pours molasses all over his vegetables and meat, and this greatly offends Scout's culinary sensibilities. So Cal hauls Scout into the kitchen and says, "*There's some folks who don't eat like us, but you ain't called on to contradict 'em at the table when they don't. That boy's your company and if he wants to eat up the table cloth, you let him, you hear?*"

"*He ain't company, Cal, he's a Cunningham*", Scout rages. "*Hush your mouth*", Cal replies, "*Don't matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house is your company, and don't let me catch you remarkin' on their ways like you was high and mighty! Your folks may be better than the Cunninghams but it don't count for nothin' the way you're disgracin' 'em.*"

We please God when we act humbly and unselfishly, especially when we show kindness to someone else, especially when we do it without selfish motives. This might require us to move out of our comfort zones. And in this we follow Christ's example.

Of course, God's in charge, and we listen for what He wants us to do. Learn where we can serve, discover what the plan is for us to use our gifts.

Humble people recognize their gifts and talents and are willing to use them as best they can, since they are gifts from God and will benefit others deserving of dignity and being acknowledged. We all need each other. We who are fortunate, need to listen to what

God is showing us to be in this our own time.... I love stories of people who intentionally put themselves in places to do so.

There's a charity in Britain called CRISIS. It is a tremendous initiative that invites people living on the streets to arrive at specially prepared locations on Christmas Eve and stay there until New Year's Day. Premises are offered – usually vacated office buildings. For weeks famous people and celebrities appeal on TV for funding, donations and volunteers to make this happen. Showers are installed, industrial kitchens to prepare hundreds of meals, surgeries for medical and dental care to be offered, hairdressing facilities, dining areas and dormitories. Organizations of all kinds donate equipment, bedding, clothing, food, catering supplies. Dozens of volunteers are asked to attend briefing sessions, and are assigned to groups and required to report at set times for briefings for each shift they have signed up for. I did this for a few years in London. It was a great way to spend Christmas, especially for anyone wanting a justifiable way to avoid spending Christmas with their families! You felt you were doing good, for unfortunate people whose lives had derailed and were living on the streets. It was a two-way thing, and you met all kinds of people especially in your own assigned group for the days you were there. When you were a seasoned CRISIS volunteer, you got familiar with how it all worked. You learned that at the briefings to volunteer quickly when the tasks were read out, to get placed for the 3 hours shifts where you felt best suited. It was also smart to get assigned soon, or you risked getting landed with tasks no one wanted – like supervising the bathrooms or other close contact roles that were frankly a bit hard to want to do. I always managed to speak up in time to get on a food shift, enjoying being on the team that carved 10 turkeys on Christmas Day and serving food all day to the guests. Others liked fitting the guests with all the donated clothes, packing up bags of supplies to give out, and some liked giving advice in the office areas set up. In my group one day was a quiet middle class couple in their 60s, Mary and James, her a college professor, him a finance director, well dressed and charming. We got chatting before the day's briefing, and I asked them what tasks they were going to volunteer for to be sure of getting their preferred ones. Oh, they said we are holding out just for one task. What's that I asked. *For all the years we've been coming we've managed to sign up for food preparation, or the advice desks, or other things, and we've really loved it. So this year we're holding out for just one task: toenail cutting and foot washing.....*

Imagine the feet of folks who lived on the streets for weeks, sometimes without bathing. Usually the group leaders gave up on anyone willing to do that. And off they went, purposefully, Mary and James, to cut toenails and wash the smelly, calloused dirt ingrained feet of complete strangers. I feel sure they'll be sitting at the table with Him as Jesus promised. AMEN