

Moving the Fences
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Pound Ridge Community Church
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2019
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:7-14

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus has gone to the house of a Pharisee to eat the Sabbath meal. As they usually do, the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely, presumably to look for any slip up with which they might embarrass or discredit him. It is also clear that Jesus is watching them. He noticed how the guests were jockeying for the best seat in the house. Your social status was marked by where you sat. Seeing this Jesus offers a word of wisdom.

When you go to a wedding, don't try to sit in the seat of honor. That is, don't go down and sit at the head table. Don't automatically assume that you are better than everyone else. There might be someone your host considers more important coming, and you might suffer the indignity of being asked to give up your seat for this other guest. As a result, you end up sitting at the back of the room, near the kitchen door, behind the pole, in the last place. Wouldn't it be better to sit at the back, and then be invited by the host to move forward to a seat of honor? The last shall be first, and the first last. Don't think of yourself too highly.

This is a key point that appears throughout Scripture – God will bring down the proud and lift up those on the margins. It is a message that Mary sang of and that Jesus lived out when he humbled himself to die on a cross.

But Jesus knows it's not just a matter of the luncheon attendees each vying with each other to decide who is the most important and powerful. The fact is, that everyone there had to be important and powerful, or they wouldn't have been invited. So, Jesus talks to them about the meaning and purpose of hospitality. There is often this sense of reciprocity. I invite you and you invite me. Or, I invite you, and you do me a favor someday. You all know how the world works.

There's nothing inherently wrong with reciprocating, but Jesus wants to push us beyond our own self-interest. He wants us to think about why we invite someone to dinner. Is it because we expect something out of it? Instead of treating hospitality in this manner, Jesus encourages us to invite those who cannot reciprocate. Invite to your banquet "the poor, crippled, lame, and blind." And you will be blessed because they can't repay you.

You see, Jesus entire ministry was focused on inviting into relationship people who didn't expect the invitation, and who could by no definition be said to deserve it. Jesus wants us to do the same for each other. Jesus wants us to give the gifts of dignity, and worth, and value to every person just because God first gave them to us. He wants us to stop calculating the costs, benefits, and rewards of our actions towards others. Jesus wants us to stop score-keeping and start giving, and blessing.

An apt metaphor for the kind of relationship that Jesus wants us to have with each other is a forest of redwood trees. I'm sure you've heard of these giant trees. They grow on America's west coast, and nowhere else on earth. These trees grow so big around that in bygone years tunnels wide enough for automobiles have been cut right through their massive trunks. Redwoods can live for centuries; some as long as 2,000 years.

They may grow as tall as 350 feet tall. Imagine being on a football field, standing under one set of goal posts, looking down to the far end of the field. Imagine that distance going straight up into the air. It almost defies imagination. But here's the really amazing thing about these trees. Despite their massive height, their roots, which are rarely more than about 3 inches thick, go no deeper than an average of 10 to 15 feet. Think of that. A tree the height of a 30-storey building being held upright for two millennia by a root system that is only about two times taller than you are!

The reason is that they spread their roots out, sometimes as wide as 900 feet. The roots interlock with those of the other trees, and they form a web so dense that knocking over a single tree would be nearly impossible. Each individual tree is literally holding up, and being held up by, its brothers and sisters.

That is exactly the kind of connection to others to which Christ calls us. How many of us can say that's the way we see ourselves and our society? You all made a clear and uncategorical announcement last June that effectively said that is the kind of world you want to work for – that everyone without exception was welcome here. And that's a wonderful statement of principle, but now we have to be as good as our principles. And who knows how we may be called upon to act on them?

There is a fascinating and heartwarming video that went viral on YouTube just over a year ago. It was made by Meir Kay, a YouTube personality who is all about spreading positivity. He's made many videos that emphasize the importance of being happy and being kind to others, and those videos have more than 350 million views on YouTube.

This particular video starts out with Kay making stops around Manhattan on Super Bowl Sunday, 2017. First, he went to a sporting goods store, where he purchased some New England Patriots jerseys. Second, he stopped to order food, especially

chicken wings. The next thing he did was to go around his neighborhood and invite five homeless men to the party he was hosting for the big game at a rooftop bar on Fifth Avenue.

Kay says he was first inspired to do this when he spotted a homeless man on the street holding a sign. The sign was not asking for money or food. It said, simply, "I feel invisible and want someone to talk to."

Now, I'm not sure how many people would actually go out and do what Kay did. But his point was not, I think, to get us to invite homeless people to parties. What Kay was trying to do was to get us to think about some important questions. Who are the people on the margins of society that have become invisible to me? What is it that they need? And what am I able and willing to do about it?

This theme is repeated in the letter to the Hebrews that we heard today. It starts off saying, "Let mutual love continue." There is a better translation you see in some versions of the Bible – "Keep loving each other like family. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:1-2) This is a reference to a story in Genesis of three strangers who visit Abraham and Sarah, and then Lott. And the strangers turn out to be angels. The message here is that we never know who God will send to knock on our door. All we will ever know of the person on the other side of the door is our own prejudices and fear, unless and until we open the door, and reach out.

I want to share a final story that happened during WWII. I heard it in a classmate's sermon at Drew years ago. Honestly, I don't know if it really happened, but it's one of those stories where that really doesn't matter. Two soldiers were trying to bury their friend, who had fallen in battle. They found a cemetery behind a high fence in a nearby church yard, and asked the young priest in the local church if they might bury their friend. The priest explained that it was a Roman Catholic cemetery, and said he could not permit their friend, who was a Protestant, to be buried there. However, he did give the two soldiers permission to dig a grave for him outside the fence, next to the cemetery.

Years after the war, the two men returned to the village, and went to visit the grave of their friend. They searched all along the perimeter of the fence, but could not find the grave. They were certain that they were in the right place, but there was no grave outside the cemetery. Finally, they managed to locate the priest, who explained the mystery. He said that after he had refused to let them bury their friend within the cemetery fence, he had been unable to sleep for days. Finally, he knew what he had to do. He went out and moved the fence, so the grave of their friend was now on the inside.

Jesus' calling to us to be people of radical hospitality and inclusion requires us to keep a question front-and-center in our communal lives. What are the things that

have come to define us in our lives, in our church, or our community that might look like a fence to someone on the outside? And what would it mean to move the fences out, so that no one need be outside?