

SERMON: Proper 17C

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 & Luke 14:7-14

Preached Sunday, August 29, 2010 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

I received a letter in the mail last week, a letter that arrived in an envelope with a return address I did not recognize. After opening it, I began reading the hand-written letter inside. Here's the first part of the letter (it makes reference to Bill Edwards, who is a retired Episcopal priest and my spiritual director):

“Dear Father Field, Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to become a member of St. Philip's. I am waiting for Father Edwards to arrange my confirmation with the Bishop. Hopefully, this can take place in the near future. Father Edwards has been tutoring me for almost a year now, and during that time I feel that my relationship with God has grown so very much. For the first time in a long time I feel a connection with God, and the knowledge that I am his child.” The letter is signed by a 47 year-old man named Tommy Laws.

I learned from Bill Edwards that Tommy grew up in Brevard and was raised as a Christian in another denomination. Tommy refers to Bill tutoring him and arranging confirmation for him because Tommy ... is in jail. He's a prisoner at Craggy Prison near Asheville. He met and came to know my spiritual director because Bill is a volunteer chaplain at the prison. Through Bill, Tommy has come to appreciate Christianity as we celebrate it in the Episcopal tradition. And since he's from Brevard, Tommy wants to have a church connection with us — even though he will be in prison for at least another seven years.

I received his letter before sitting down to work on my sermon for this morning. When I did, here are some of the words I read from the Letter to the Hebrews. You can imagine how different they sounded to me after what I had just read:

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:1-3).

Two days later, we sat down for our weekly staff meeting and discussed final plans for the visit from our friends at St. Michael's Parish and the Diocese of Durgapur in India. From the articles we've published, you know that Archana Adhikary and the Rev. Swagata Das will be with us two Sundays from now, and will join us for our parish picnic in the afternoon. In the spiritual sense they are not strangers: we pray for St. Michael's and the Diocese every week. But, in another sense, they are strangers to us because their country and culture are in some ways so different than our own.

Two very different situations, but each presents the same challenge. What sort of welcome will we give to a 47 year-old man in Craggy Prison and two travelers from India? What does the Gospel call us to do in the name of Christian hospitality? The Letter from the Hebrews seems pretty straightforward: if we're going to be God's people, then we have to welcome strangers as if they were angels sent from God. And we must remember those in prison as if we were in prison with them. We are called to sacrifice some of what we have and share it with others. It's what the author means when he insists that “mutual love” be the basis for our actions. Then Jesus sharpens the point and says that when we throw a dinner party, we should invite the poor, the blind and the lame rather than our family, friends and well-off neighbors. Simple and easy to understand, right? Well ... maybe. But it's not really what we do in our private lives — is it? I know I don't. And I have a hunch that most folks here aren't so different from me.

So let's be honest — even if it pains us to admit it: most of the time, we don't do what the New Testament calls for when it comes to welcoming and remembering those who are not like us. There are probably lots of reasons for this: we tell ourselves we are too busy doing other things; we've heard stories about some strangers which make us fearful of all strangers; we assume that people in prison are there because they're ne'er-do-wells — and our parents warned us to stay away from people like that! And let's confess one more thing: if welcoming the stranger and remembering those in prison really caught on, many of us would feel pressure to do the same.

Page 2

I could make the list longer, but you get the idea. We all have excuses. Of course, they don't hold water when we remember the witness of the Bible. But we are busy and imperfect people, and we hope God will forgive us.

My friends, this does not have to be the end of the story. It's true that most of us are unlikely to start being vastly more hospitable to strangers and visiting those in prison. But when we think and pray and act as the Church, this is precisely what we can do! On my own, I don't have enough courage or conviction to do these things, but as the gathered community of the faithful, we can do precisely these things through Christ who strengthens us. If it's up to you or me alone, it's too much of an uphill battle. But when we look each other in the eye and say, "Jesus shows us the way and will be with us," we will be amazed at what can happen.

During his time as president of our nation, Thomas Jefferson and a group of friends were traveling across the country on horseback. They came to a river that had overflowed its banks due to a recent rainstorm. The swollen river had washed away the only available bridge. This meant that each rider was forced to cross the river on horseback, fighting against the rapid currents. A traveler who was on foot and not part of their group stepped aside to watch them cross.

After several had plunged in and made it to the other side, the stranger asked Thomas Jefferson if he would ferry him across the river. The president agreed without hesitation. The man climbed on, and shortly thereafter the two of them made it safely to the other side.

As the stranger slid off the back of the saddle onto dry ground, a member of the group asked him, "Tell me, why did you choose the president to ask this favor?" The man was shocked, admitting he had no idea it was the president who had helped him. He said, "All I know is that on some of your faces was written the answer 'No,' and on some of them was the answer 'yes.' His was a 'Yes' face."*

And what kind of face do we wear when we meet a stranger? What sort of welcome is God asking us to show?

In the coming days, I am going to write a letter back to Tommy Laws and welcome him to St. Philip's. And two Sundays from now, I will personally welcome Archana Adhikary and Swagata Das. I will not be doing this because I'm inherently good or hospitable. But as one of your designated leaders, you empower me to do it in the name of St. Philip's and ultimately in the name of Christ.

As your Rector, you'd probably wonder what was wrong with me if I didn't do these things. But here's where the rubber really hits the road: you don't have to show any of these people your "yes face." You don't have to be friendly to Tommy Laws when he gets out of prison several years from now. You don't have to write to him between now and then. You don't have to introduce yourself to our visitors from Durgapur. And you don't have to make an effort to communicate with them and learn about their life and faith.

So perhaps the most fruitful question to ask of ourselves and the Church as a whole is, What would Jesus have us do?

*Chuck Swindoll in The Grace Awakening (Word, 1990), p. 6.