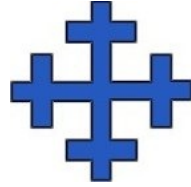


# St Mary of the Harbor

## Provincetown, Massachusetts



September 1, 2019

Pentecost 12 C Proper 17

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

### **Hebrews 13:1-2**

*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

### **Luke 14:1,7-14**

*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

*He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, 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 righteous."*



## Angel in Disguise

Amy Jill Levine, a well known New Testament scholar, said that she is pretty sure that Jesus must have been overweight given how many stories about him involve food. And based on his dining habits, he obviously wasn't very discerning when it came to who he ate with either. Jesus himself pointed out that there were people who said he was a glutton and drunkard, a friend of sinners and scoundrels alike.<sup>1</sup> With a reputation like that, you would think Jesus would have been about as welcome at a banquet in the home of a prominent Pharisee as a dirty talking drag queen would be at a Southern Baptist pot luck. And yet, there we find Jesus hobnobbing with the pious folk.

In Luke's delicious little narrative, everyone is watching everyone else. The Pharisees are watching Jesus. And Jesus is watching the guests. Being seen with right people was evidently a thing back then, just as it is today. Who got invited and where you sat indicated where you were in the pecking order. And all the Pharisee's dinner guests knew it.

Jesus must have been rather dismayed by what he saw. Watching people embarrass themselves is never comfortable. As people filed into the room, some of the guests immediately sought to position themselves at the places of honor.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:19

Sound familiar? We all do it at times, usually unknowingly and without realizing how it looks to God. Have you ever been annoyed because someone sat in *your* place in church on Sunday morning? Or someone took *your* parking space? Or a group of people who arrived after you were shown to a table at the local restaurant while you had to wait?

We often give too much weight to these little slights, even when they are unintentional. It certainly doesn't help that we live in a world that reinforces the view that one's value is tied to one's social status. While we may not live in a first century Greco-Roman culture where social ranking was commonplace, status is still a coveted commodity in our day. Even in our quasi-egalitarian culture, deference is paid far more often to those at the top of the ladder than those at the bottom, which is why, given the choice, most of us prefer the view from above.

I suspect that most of us know that our value as human beings is not really dependent on where we are on the social ladder. If we are honest though, we all spend more time than we should comparing ourselves to other people who are wealthier, prettier, or more privileged than we are. Unfortunately, that can translate into an unhealthy need to be admired or seen by others as important. Why do you think so many people post their every waking thought to FaceBook, Twitter, and every other online platform out there?

I came across an interesting article a while back about the role that status plays in society and the effect it has on the very wealthiest people. The writer suggested that there is a point where people become so wealthy that making money is no longer their primary motivation in life. Rather than wealth, adulation becomes their primary motivator, which tells you something about the malleability of the human ego.

Don't get me wrong. The need to feel valued is important to every person's emotional well being. Too often though, we measure our value relative to others by pursuing the wrong things or taking the wrong paths in life. Perhaps that is why Jesus suggested a different approach.

When he saw how people were jockeying for places of honor at the Pharisee's home, he did not condemn the dinner guests or his host for that matter. Instead, Jesus offered them an alternative to the meritocracy they were caught up in, a system where some people were seen as being more valuable than others. It is an alternative that is available to us today as well.

The kind of banquet Jesus describes looks nothing like the one described in Luke's Gospel. When God is your host, no one is valued more than someone else. No one is left out. Everyone has a place at the table. The important thing to remember here is that when you are God's guest, it is not *where* you sit that matters but *who* you sit with, *and* that you have been invited at all.

Years ago when I was looking at seminaries, I visited the General Theological Seminary in New York City. At the end of the day after all the interviews had concluded, I decided

to attend Evensong. I arrived early and sat alone in the back of the chapel waiting for the service to begin. Seminarians and professors began to file in a few minutes later. They all sat in the chancel near the altar which seemed like a long way from where I was.

Now the thing is, when you are in an unfamiliar place among people you don't know, it is easy to feel as if you don't belong. It must have looked that way to one of the more perceptive seminarians who saw me, because she got up from her chair and walked to the back of the chapel where I was sitting. Maybe it was because she was a black woman who had grown up in Georgia and knew what it is like to feel like you don't belong. Or maybe it was because she remembered a time when her parents and their friends had no choice but to sit in the back.

To this day, I can still recall the image from that encounter with an angel in disguise. The words she spoke were right out of Luke's gospel. And all these years later, those five simple words affirmed that I mattered to someone and that I was valued and loved. "Come and sit with me," the woman said. Jesus could not have said it any better himself.