

God's Kitchen Table

Proper 17 - Year C

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Life is a risk. It always has been and always will be. When you get out of bed, you might fall and break your hip; or when you eat breakfast, you might get salmonella from your scrambled eggs. When you drive to work, you might get into an accident; and when you walk into work, you might get laid-off.

Relationships are risky. When you greet new neighbors, they might not like you; when you accept a new job, you might not like your co-workers; or when you hire new employees; they might not work out. You risk that a first date might be a wasted evening, or that your attraction might not be reciprocated. And since nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, it is a really big risk when we stand at the altar and say, "I do."

In the past few years, life has felt much riskier. At a wedding, a vacation, a dinner party, church or even the grocery store, you might have been exposed to Covid. After finding the perfect house, it might be sold before you can even make an offer, or the seller will have a change of mind and take it off the market. In this economy, you could lose your life savings in the stock or crypto market. There's no guarantee that knee replacement will take away the pain or chemotherapy will cure the cancer. These days, it's risky to gather in a big crowd; there might be a bomb scare or a mass shooting. And for our children and grandchildren, their future survival is at risk due to climate change and global warming.

Even faith is a risk, for as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It is risky to have faith in things hoped for; you might get disappointed. It is risky to believe in things not seen; your friends might think you're crazy. And, when we declare our faith, we lose some of our freedom and security as we submit to a power and wisdom greater than ourselves.

When Noah declared his faith, he and his family ended up in an ark with a bunch of animals for 40 days and 40 nights – only to start humanity over again. When Abraham and Sarah professed their faith, at the ripe old age of ninety plus, they were called to leave home and start a family. When Moses and the Hebrew people put their faith in action, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. When Peter, Paul, James and many of Jesus' followers down

through the ages confessed their faith, they were beaten, imprisoned, and executed – all for the love of Christ.

This morning's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews offers words of exhortation and encouragement to a community of Christians who are tired of living the life of faith, who have grown weary of walking the talk. Scholars have never been able to determine the authorship, the date, the location. Hence, it is an anonymous document addressed to an unknown audience.

The Epistle to the Hebrews was probably an early Christian sermon - rabbinical in design, Christian in content, and heroic in length - probably written in the late first century by someone who was part of Paul's missionary effort. Many scholars think the author was a well-educated Jewish Christian with broad training in Hellenistic thought - perhaps, a traveling or itinerant preacher or missionary.

While we don't know the identity of the audience; it is evident that the preacher-writer was speaking to a community of faith with urgent pastoral concerns. According to biblical commentator Thomas Long, they were tired: "tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus." They were losing confidence in the Jesus movement and threatening to fall away. Sounds like the church today - clergy and lay people alike.

The preacher doesn't talk about quick fixes or problem solving, but rather goes directly to the heart of the matter, diving to the depths of faith in a counter-intuitive and provocative manner. "Let mutual love continue." Be kind and generous with each other.

Do you remember that risk of relationship I mentioned earlier? When we accept Christ in our lives, we are initiated not only into a relationship with Jesus, but also into a community in his name. We are called to care for one another, to be concerned with the welfare of each other. We are expected to love (not necessarily like) our companions in Christ.

As a community gathered in Jesus' name, we are invited to break bread together - not as an exclusive event, a private affair, or an intimate dinner party - but as a celebration of radical hospitality where all are truly welcome. And therein lies an element of risk. We don't know who's going to show up at the table - at either the eucharist or the potluck.

The author of Hebrews writes: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it." We, who profess to be followers of Jesus, are called to welcome strangers into our churches, communities, and daily lives. And not just strangers who look and act like us, but rather strangers who might be very different from us, but who are also invited by God to join the party.

Jesus spent a lot of time at parties. In fact, he did his first miracle at a wedding reception. As Episcopal priest and author Robert Farrah Capon reminds us in a little cookbook and entertaining guide called *Party Spirit*, "Some of the nicest, and a number of the nastiest," things [Jesus] ever said were couched in parables about parties" - like the one we heard this morning.

When we give a party, we are taking the risk of faith - declaring through our hospitality that we believe in community, friendship and abundance, and in hosting a party, we also declare that we believe our guests are worth the effort. In Capon's words, "We are offering...to refresh their

history with a decisively hopeful last chapter, all on a Saturday night.” If you think about it, giving a party is actually modeling what we do in church each Sunday.

Hosting a party in God’s home or our own is a risk that nobody will show up, or too many people will show up. Perhaps, there won’t be enough food and drink, or there will be so much that we’ll be eating leftovers for weeks. We might not have enough chairs for people to sit, or somebody might break or spill wine on our favorite chair. Giving a party is a risk that the guests might not get along, someone might say or do something inappropriate, we might have to deal unexpectedly with someone’s pain, anger or grief, and the list goes on and on....And yet, Jesus taught that all of life is a party given by God, a table filled with God’s creation, offered to us in abundance so that we may be filled and satisfied; and he models how to be both a generous host and gracious guest.

It was Jesus’ mission on earth to help us see clearly God’s intentions for this grand party we call life – to help us to understand and follow God’s rules for table etiquette as much as we follow those of Ms. Manners or Emily Post. Jesus’ notion of table etiquette can be summed up in two words: humility and hospitality. If we human beings lived according to this customary, we would probably experience the Realm of God on earth, at least at the dinner table.

The dinner party, a metaphor for Gospel living, is not about cultivating a society of one’s own kind. It’s not about getting ahead through entertaining. No, the dinner party according to Jesus is about celebrating life with your neighbor - crossing the boundaries of race and class, sharing the bounty of the harvest with those less fortunate than yourself. That’s what it means to “let mutual love continue while showing hospitality to strangers.” Yes, it’s a risky venture, and it can be exhausting, but trust me, it’s worth it.

Like many of you, I've hosted and attended lots of parties with all kinds of people. Sometimes I've caught myself wishing this or that person hadn't shown up, or I hadn't been seated next to them. However, as I reflect back on those people, I have come to believe that they have been among my best teachers about life, faith, relationships, and risk-taking - angels (holy messengers) in disguise.

In his [blog post](#) this week, Peter Olsen writes about one such party. Until the Covid pandemic, the 2-4-6 Community Kitchen, funded in part by an outreach grant from this chapel, held a weekly dinner throughout the winter months here in Wellfleet. In Peter's words:

Organized and run by a consortium of civic leaders, church members and volunteers, the dinner was hosted each Tuesday evening in the church basement [of the Methodist Church located at 246 Main Street], welcoming as many as two hundred people. No reservations were necessary. There were no conditions nor any requirement to demonstrate need. Though there were plenty of food insecure folk who came to us regularly, they were not the only attendees. Many senior folk, who live alone and experience severe isolation during the long winter months here on the Outer Cape, found company and friendship. Young AmeriCorps workers housed in various settings throughout the forests of the National Seashore welcomed the opportunity to gather and socialize under one roof, a luxury where most of the local bars, restaurants and clubs are closed for the season. There were musicians who graced us with music on the church's ancient piano as lively conversation was had at each table.

As Peter aptly notes, the 2-4-6 Dinner stood in "stark contrast to other feeding ministries" which both he and I have been involved over the course of our long ministries. How so? At the 2-4-6 Dinner, there were no them, only us. The 2-4-6 Dinner was a giant "church" supper where all

are welcome at God's big kitchen table. The 2-4-6 Dinner was the kind of table fellowship that Jesus was talking about, and for the sake of Wellfleet's year-round community, I hope it will return this winter.

The world needs more of these tables of hospitality and risk. For as the Native American writer and poet laureate Joy Harjo writes in her poem, "Perhaps the World Ends Here"

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on...

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table...

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating the last sweet bite.¹

I'm convinced that Jesus' table is a great big kitchen table with plenty of food and a place for everyone. I don't know about you, but I want to serve and sit this hospitable and humble table on a regular basis - even with the pains-in-the-you-know-what, for they might be angels in disguise.

¹ "Perhaps the World Ends Here." Joy Harjo, 1994