

SMSA#218, 12 after Pentecost C**Charles M. Pope****September 1, 2019****Jeremiah 2:4-13****Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16****Luke 14:1,7-14**

“Let mutual love continue.” With these words the epistle today from Hebrews begins. It continues: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

In these words, it is interesting to note that the writer links mutual love, caring for each other in the church, with hospitality, caring for the outsider. And the writer speaks of mutual love and hospitality as natural occurrences.

In his book on Reaching Out Henri Nouwen says that “our world is full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self, and from their God.”

So, following from his statement, a place of community, of hospitality, a place of companionship is a place to be valued in our world. Hospitality and mutual love create a space for the stranger. In that space the stranger becomes a guest, or perhaps even a friend.

But initial hospitality is only the initial step in establishing mutual love. For after the stranger has become a guest, or perhaps a friend, there hopefully is a reciprocating. And there is a hospitality to the one who was first hospitable. So, eventually it is possible that newer people are hospitable to people who have been here for decades. And it is in that reciprocating that mutual love occurs.

And so, it is that at St. Mark's we are trying to create such a community. And we encourage mutual love. In the parish I was in before coming here in Grinnell, Iowa, in 1872, members of that church in those days hoped to build their first church building. A Morning Prayer service occurred on September 11, 1872 and was advertised in the local newspaper. It read: "The thanks of the congregation is tendered to the Masonic brethren for the use of their organ, and to Mrs. Hilyer for her kindness in presiding thereat, to the Y.M.C.A for the use of their hall, to Dr. Harris for the use of lamps, and to all who interested themselves in our behalf.

We would invite *all* who feel themselves in any way interested in this enterprise to hand in their names to our committee.” A little over a year later, in the same newspaper, we find these words. “Notice – The ladies of the Episcopal Society will give a supper at their rooms on Wednesday evening next. The object is to raise money for the purpose of aiding in building their church. All are respectfully invited to come and partake. We need not urge on any of those who were so fortunate as to have partaken of the supper given by the ladies a year ago to be on hand at this time, for we know they will not fail, but to all others we say, go and get the best supper you ever ate, and at the same time assist in a good cause, as we understand that this society intends to commence building their house of worship immediately. We append to this a copy of the bill of fare of last year, which they intend to excel on this occasion.

Oyster stew, scalloped oysters, boiled ham, boiled corn beef

Roasts – canvas back ducks, turkeys, geese, chicken.

Relishes – pickles, jellies etc.

Dessert – mince pies, lemon pies and hot tea and coffee.”

I would say that is step above a potluck. Those early Episcopalians intended on being hospitable to those who had helped them, and to all who would come.

One remarkable thing about the Hebrews passage today is its emphasis on intent. It would be easy to assume that any given church is naturally warm and inviting or cold and uninviting.

But the writer of Hebrews challenges that easy assumption. In today's epistle we are challenged to be intentional in our hospitality. We are challenged to continue in mutual love. To be intentional in continuing mutual love might be to greet someone at church whom you have not greeted in a long time. In any church, there will be people who have not related with each other over time due to any number of circumstances.

Those relationships have become frozen, often in an atmosphere of bitterness and anger. To be intentional in hospitality might be one person who decides to break the cycle of bitterness.

To be intentional might be greeting someone who was first hospitable to you. To reciprocate that hospitality.

We are challenged to be intentional in hospitality. That might mean delaying your departure from church until you have approached and greeted someone.

The writer of Hebrews expands intentional hospitality even more by challenging us to walk a mile in the shoes of someone who is in prison or to walk a mile in the shoes of someone who is being tortured.

Now, does the writer mean that we are to seek out those in prison or those being tortured so we can show our hospitality? That is a possibility, and certainly an option. But the main point there is that we are sensitive to those who are outsiders, to those who are disenfranchised. For in initiating hospitality we pave the way for reciprocation, for mutual love.

And yet, that challenge to be intentional is not resonant with a popular emphasis on loving when you feel like it. Following that line of thinking, if one does not feel loving, one does not love. One is not hospitable. One is not engaged in mutual love. If a church is not warm and loving, it is because the magic is not there.

And yet in Hebrews we see that love is not just experienced, not just caught, not just enjoyed when it comes by. Love is built. The warmth and hospitality in a church is not something that is mysteriously there or not. Mutual love is built. Mutual love is created by the steps we take and the hand we extend.

At the same time, it is before us to respect how people want to be welcomed, how people want to be loved, whether you are brand new, or been here for decades. Some people like to be cared for in small exchanges. “How are you doing today? I am fine.”

Some expect when you ask them how they are doing that you will stay there until they have told you how they are doing. So, there is an art to it. And there is a respect to it.

But you know, there is one thing about building mutual love. Someone has to go first. Someone has to take the initiative. Someone has to take a risk. For newer people, you should never underestimate the value of reciprocation and your own initiative. And you should not minimize your own initiative to those who have been here longer or to other newcomers.

For, in our world, whatever your social position, the person who genuinely and actively cares for another is not that common.

To not be hospitable, to not be involved in mutual love is to set up something in the church which I call parallelism where people come to the same place, and do the same things, but never connect. I fear it is all too common in many churches. And in those communities, I think mutual love is opportunity lost.

But if a whole church is engaged in taking risks and in reciprocating, something wonderful can happen. Something beautiful and loving can be built. New initiating steps to create love are taken. Old relationships become new. The stranger becomes the guest. The guest becomes a friend. And that friend, in reciprocating, reaches out to the one who first reached out. Mutual love flourishes. So, when a newcomer enters such a place, hospitality is in the air.

Warmth and welcome are obvious. Why? Because love is there, and because love is being built. And where mutual love is being built in the church, God blesses that activity.

And so mutual love winds up being more than giving and receiving. It winds up being blessedness. And in that blessedness, we feel God very near.

May it be more so at St. Mark's. May our initial welcome be legendary in this county. May reciprocation be anticipated. May we know the pure joy of opening our hearts in initial and reciprocal hospitality. And let our mutual loving be respectful. Let mutual love continue. Amen.