

Hebrews 13:1-3 (NRSV)

Service Well-Pleasing to God

13 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Luke 14: 1, 7-11 (NRSV)

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.

Humility and Hospitality

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 “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; 9 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. 10 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. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

“Love and Humility”

Tomorrow is Labor Day! ***Labor Day***, the first Monday in September, is a creation of the **labor** movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

Last Monday was Women’s Equality Day, celebrating the 99th anniversary of the certification of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. In 1971 Congress declared August 26th as Women’s Equality Day, but that escapes the notice of most of us, along with the partnering Women’s Equal Pay Act, passed Aug. 26th in 1963. But, both

Labor Day and Women’s Equality Day are important to us for several reasons.

Jeanne Carleson tells us that these particular causes for celebration had a great impact on her family. Her mother had been working two jobs as a single parent of five children, and they were all happy for her when she landed a job at the local company that printed city directories, because this meant that she could work just ONE job to support the family. She ran one of two large Xerox machines, and often came home with black printing dust spattered on her clothes. But, it was a good job, and the hours roughly coincided with her children’s school day, so she didn’t have to feel guilty about leaving the children home alone. An added plus was that the print shop was within walking distance from the house, saving the consumption of precious gasoline. One day, her supervisor called her into his office to give her good news -- she was getting a raise! She thanked him, then asked how much the guy was getting who ran the other Xerox machine, doing exactly the same work. The supervisor sputtered and stuttered. The other guy had a family to support, after all. “What on earth do you think I’m doing?” Jeanne’s mother asked him. As we all know from some difficult life circumstances, equality is not something that can be legislated!

In the passage of Scripture we shared from Luke’s gospel today, Jesus is speaking about KINGDOM EQUALITY, which must be based on Love and Humility before God and neighbors. Jesus is an invited guest at a rather schwanky dinner at a Pharisees’ home, and **there** has an opportunity to observe the obvious jockeying for positions of power and prestige. Seeing a teachable moment, Jesus begins by telling a parable. Now, you may remember that Jesus’ parables often turn societal expectations upside down, and this is no exception.

Jewish Palestine, where Jesus lived, was part of the Roman Empire, and governed by the Roman class structure. Birth, wealth, position, and citizenship determined the social classes. There were several levels of Upper Class, no middle class, there was the lower class, usually comprised of those who could not repay their debts, and then there were slaves. Social advancement was everyone’s goal, and putting yourself forward by

associating with those who were one rung above you on the social ladder, required constant maneuvering.

But Jesus had a different idea for the way thing ought to work. So, Jesus addressed the banquet guests first, reminding them of the Proverbial advice: ***“Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”*** While this was practical social advice for his listeners, it carried with it a reminder that the people present belonged to God, not Rome. Jesus was reinforcing each one’s identity as a child of God, an identity which had eroded as secular culture encroached upon the sacredness of living in the community of God’s design. The Roman practice of self-promotion did not fit well with the teachings of the prophets who encouraged people to “walk humbly with God.”

So Jesus was telling the guests at the feast, *“Instead of seeking glory for yourself, spend your time and energy giving glory to God.”* While the guests chewed on that food for thought, Jesus turned to his host, the leader of the Pharisees. This Pharisee must have respected Jesus, in order to invite him to this social function. Whether that respect was afforded due to Jesus’ teachings, healings, or large numbers of followers, we do not know. But since he was present, Jesus had an opportunity to influence the practices of this religious leader!

“You’re inviting the wrong people,” Jesus told him. “By inviting only friends, family, and those who can advance your status, you are not better than these guests who are fighting over the best seat in the house. You’re trying to make yourself look good by surrounding yourself with ‘important’ people, while you ignore the ones who should be enjoying your hospitality.”

Jesus always knows how to ‘cut to the chase.’ He recognized both the guests and their host as social climbers, and he wanted to urge them toward true generosity, real hospitality that expected nothing in return. It was time to throw out the old social order of self-promotion and realize that we are all in equal need of grace and mercy in the eyes of God. And, if we believe that is true, **how** can we continue to participate in a system that places more value on some people and less value on others?

Jesus came to level the playing field between the haves and the have nots, between the wealthy and the poor, between the healthy and the sick. We are all in need of grace, healing, a new perspective on God’s design and desire for our relationships and interactions. Jesus wants us to understand that our all-too-human drive to seek the best seat in the house does not show genuine participation in God’s mercy or love. Only true humility can give us the right perspective.

Jesus reminds us that we don’t need to try to impress anyone with our status, prestige, or level of righteousness. The only one whose opinion of us matters is God. And God knows our hearts, our foibles, our motivations. And God loves us anyway!!

So, during this week of celebrating Labor Day and Women’s Equality Day, perhaps our focus should be on thanking God for the ability to labor for our own family and on behalf of others. And we should remember the shifting of societal trends and norms each time folks have rallied together to uplift those who have not been treated fairly. If we are those in positions of power and influence, that may mean modeling humbling ourselves so that others, and all, may be elevated and freed from societal constraints that diminish one’s ability to reach their created potential.

In a moment, as we accept Christ’s invitation to come to the table of grace, may we recognize the joy of knowing that ALL are invited, as we all need grace, and that we have yet another opportunity to say to a reluctant neighbor, “What are you doing down there? Come on up and sit by me.” Amen.

Quote of the Day

Diversity is having a seat at the table;

Inclusion is having a voice;

Belonging is having that voice be heard!