

JEREMIAH 2:4-13 or SIRACH 10:12-18 or PROVERBS 25:6-7

PSALM 81:1, 10-16 or PSALM 112

HEBREWS 12:18-29

LUKE 14:1, 7-14

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

A Hospitable Tableau! A Hospitality Teaser!

Hospitality! It is perhaps the most bastardized word in the English language, yes, misappropriated, misinterpreted, misrepresented, misunderstood! Let me count the ways! In the interest of full disclosure, it is a lot like with “trinity” a word, much to the surprise of some, does not appear anywhere in the New Testament! There is not an actual word in either the Hebrew Bible or Christian scriptures literally translated as “hospitality,” though the meaning is clearly there and used frequently in our modern translations, just like in today’s epistle reading from the Book of Hebrews! In its circuitous etymology, the word “hospitality” has evolved, or rather devolved, from a richly layered theological word supported by solid biblical underpinnings to its pedestrian usage describing kinds of manners and proper social etiquette. Biblically and theologically, it is not a part of our faithful vocabulary, our spiritual vernacular! Sadly, it almost comes across like a foreign language! From its humble but rich origins hospitality was and remains a common practice, an ancient custom routinely honored and observed in the lands known as the Near or Middle East, religiously followed by its diverse peoples. Unfortunately, in its contemporary association, images related to hospitality have been expediently reduced to polite niceties, leaving out the most important aspects of this complex term. For example, it is easy to associate hospitality with social events, indeed a form of hosting, but more akin to the simple offering of a cool beverage, ah lemonade in the summer, or a hot one, a cup of tea or coffee in winter, and of course, one’s favorite alcoholic libation. After all, it is five o’clock somewhere! Yes, hospitality is usually used in a perfunctory or proprietary way, generally describing the dining, hotel, and motel industry. I hazard to guess that most individuals today would never imagine equating this multipurpose term with something biblical or theological, imagining it to be a foundational centerpiece, a cornerstone, undergirding three great monotheistic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Hospitality is a watchword carefully guiding the bedrock practices that framed the lives of the nomads, a set of rubrics, rules and regulations, that eventually were codified by the Bedouins, forming a necessary paradigm, good boundaries, for living. Hospitality as a foundational

principle served to protect travelers of all types, ensuring the safety of both accidental and/or incidental guest and host, serendipitously and surprisingly brought together in real time. Travel in the ancient world was fraught with danger, even as it still poses a threat in many off-the-beaten-path places, travelers exposed to the whims of thieving bandits who lurked in the protective shadows, hidden from view, out of sight but never out of mind. For those who by choice or by necessity sojourned in the most dangerous of places, highway robbery back in the day, and to a large degree even now, was a routine and violent practice on the open road. Hospitality allowed for a built-in truce among those the Hebrew Bible calls aliens, foreigners, strangers, a *détente* that under no circumstances could be breached, challenged, or threatened. In like mind, the same principles applied to the most vulnerably compromised of society, specifically widows and orphans who by default had no protections under the law, not even allowed inheritance if an eligible man was in the mix. Yes, hospitality is a lynchpin of social justice, addressing those on the fringes of society, the disenfranchised and dispossessed, the marginalized whose lives are always lived on the edge of oblivion. Finally, understanding ancient hospitality in its broader contemporary biblical and theological interpretation, always advocates for welcome and inclusion, openly accepting and affirming all humanity as conceived and imaged by the Divine who created each human being according to their own unique beauty and giftedness. Hospitality is the be all, end all, in terms of nurturing human relationships in all their myriad forms. Restaurants? Motels? Hotels? A libation? Seems a might hollow, something amiss, somewhat cheap or shallow in my estimation, lacking the depth and breadth this concept deserves! Today, as we embark on another homiletical journey together, we turn aside and take a look at two texts from the lectionary that take us on a hospitality adventure to hospitable places known and unknown, holy conversation reminding us of the primacy of this essential and unavoidable yet oft hidden feature of our faith! Allow me to welcome you into a world that has become my own, an obsession, a paperchase extraordinaire, a world that has become part and parcel of my life and my career, and yes, my extensive research, all of it intertwined, inseparable in oh so many ways!

But before we dive into today's texts, we need to take a bit of a detour, but it is an excursion demanded by some much needed background informing our epistle lection from the Book of Hebrews, a letter written by an unknown author who held a vast wealth of information about historical Judaism. The writer makes what appears to be a general statement, nothing out of the ordinary, but it is a declaration that would ring true with deepest, the most profound, meaning for any observant, or even the most passive or nominal, Jewish reader, assuming there were any, that there was such a thing. The writer declares, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," or as the King James eloquently puts it, "angels unawares!" I love that poetically eloquent phrasing from the king's English! This is a scripture verse that in many ways has become commonplace, in some ways even transcending the biblical narrative, used in a variety of contexts and settings, with some who quote it perhaps not even aware that it is a statement

derived from the Bible. Any Jew with even a modicum of understanding of the content of Torah would have immediately known the source for this anonymous writer's musings. Let me take you there now!

In Genesis 18 we read the story of the three mystery guests who visit Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham was a typical, perhaps the quintessential, nomadic herder, always leading his flocks to greener pasture. Supposedly, he had heard a divine voice telling him to pack up all his possessions and set out for an unknown land that God would eventually show him. Yes, "on the road again!" On this average, ordinary day, in the life of this nomad, came these three unannounced and unknown guests who approach from afar, their identities withheld by the biblical writer who teases the reader by letting us in on a secret, that they are of divine origin. Abraham hasn't a clue, however, believing them to be the human beings, the men, they clearly appear to be. Abraham runs to greet them, reminiscent of the way the father in the parable of the prodigal greets his wayward son. The soon-to-be-patriarch of many nations lavishly and expediently afforded them the expected and appropriate level of hospitality, an extravagant meal including a calf, young, tender, and good. Veal anyone? It is another foreshadowing found in that prodigal parable! I detect an emerging theme here! Abraham barks out orders to his servants and to his wife while he makes small talk, assuring his surprise visitors that all their temporal needs will be met forthwith. No detail is left undone, no stone unturned, no requirement left to chance to meet the immediate needs of his royally greeted and treated guests. In this story we see hospitality first definitively illustrated in the biblical narrative as a specific, detailed, event, a custom that will become a prevailing theme throughout the Bible, even when subtly hidden in the nuance of various biblical texts. This sentence captures the essence of the theory guiding my research!

By the way, these are the same guests who will leave the comforts of Abraham's oasis, and travel to Sodom and then be hospitably welcomed by Abraham's nephew Lot—like uncle, like nephew—only to be threatened by the men of the town who sought them harm, who sought to rape them in a show of force, of dominance, power, and control, causing Lot, in a last and would have been futile resort save for one of the guest's intervention, to even offer his daughters as an unwilling sacrifice to satisfy their evil intents, to assuage their perverse appetites. Their lustfully horrific actions and irrationally psychotic based vitriolic behavior—and we are not talking sex when using those images—revealed an egregious breach, the ultimate violation, a disgusting display of insult to sacrosanct hospitable requirements. In the final analysis, it was their inhospitality to those who should have been regarded with decorum as guests that led to the destructive demise of Sodom and Gomorrah, the wicked cities, God's wrath brought upon those whose evil failed to meet the basic standard of hospitable welcome! In other words, the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing to do with sexuality, homosexuality specifically, that shallow understanding and ignorantly surface viewpoint typically interpreting the larger narrative complete and utter nonsense, a total fabrication of

facts, all conveniently through the centuries used to reinforce prejudice and manipulate an agenda against a vulnerably compromised people group, you know who! All these images, endearing and horrific, would have readily, immediately, played in the memories of those first century followers of Jesus now reading the ramblings of the writer of Hebrews. In scripture, everything comes full circle when you understand the background undergirding any text. Yes, what goes around always seems to come around in the biblical narrative. The writer of Hebrews then reminds this Jewish and Greek audience, "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." In other words, once the new relationship is quickly established, cemented, in any context between host and guest, guest and host, the two now become as one, each party contributing equally despite one offering tangible good gifts to the other. It is indeed a relationship leading to an egalitarian reciprocity. That being said, it is dependent on the one, the host, to meet the needs of the other, the guest, the one receiving, "other" being the operative word.

In today's Witness from the Gospels, we read one of many hospitable texts related to the mission and ministry of Jesus, the man from Nazareth, who was and is the very embodiment of ancient hospitable belief and practice. His picture could be squarely put next to the best definition of this delightfully loaded term. None of this, however, should come as any surprise, for all of Jesus' preaching and teaching, along with his loving acts of goodness and grace, were deeply rooted, heavily immersed and enmeshed in the ancient cultural phenomenon of hospitality. In every instance where he encountered and engaged an individual, people from all walks of life, every stripe, both genders and all races, every economic status, all of it was steeped in a custom birthed in the Near East and of course, therefore, honored extensively by the Israelites, shown most fully in the Hebrew Bible even as it gave birth to the intertestamental literature known as the Apocrypha, and then of course, the Christian scriptures that tell the story of Jesus and the eventual and inevitable birth of the Church through its countless adventures, its trials, travails, and tribulations. One writer incorrectly observes, "In the ancient world, hospitality was a mutual exchange of favors. But in the teachings of Jesus, the practice became non-reciprocal. He challenges us to care specifically for those who cannot repay us: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." NO! Sadly, the first part of this amateur commentator's slanted assessment simply is not true, hospitality has always demanded that the host honor the needs of the guest, going to whatever lengths to satisfy basic human sustenance guaranteeing survival, expecting nothing in return other than goodwill and Godspeed. The only potential quid pro quo would be that in doing for others, they might just decide not to do unto you, harm that is! In that regard, it is a twist on the old adage I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine! Remember the plotline for the parable called "The Good Samaritan," another hospitality text! I sense a recurring theme! This is a reminder that you simply cannot trust any and every biblical

commentary. Just because someone says it does not make it so, does not make it true, and that includes me! You have to do your homework! You must do your homework!

This same writer was correct, however, when suggesting that “when people sit down at a table for a meal, there is a lot going on than eating and drinking.” Yes, there is far more to a meal in the ancient Near Eastern world than grabbing some grub on the run! Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her defining and groundbreaking work “Deciphering a Meal,” points out that in the ancient world every meal was coded, each code indicative of subtle but clearly given and received messaging, loaded and layered with meaning and meanings. Meals were events. They were not just occasions to eat and fill hungry mouths, satisfying, sating starving tummies! Into this reality came the many meals, the various dinner parties, to which Jesus was invited or invited himself. New Testament commentator Robert Karris, in his description of the Lukan narrative, suggests that you “can literally eat your way through Luke’s Gospel!” Today we are privy to one of the many such meals in which Jesus came as guest and eventually, as was often the case, yes, even inevitably, became the host! See the road to Emmaus story in Luke’s resurrection narratives for a fine example!

Jesus had obviously been invited to the home of a leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath, something that on an initial glance seems a bit surprising! This textual caveat calls to mind a couple of things, some quick observations! First, it is evident that Jesus was not in an adversarial relationship with all the Pharisees, that at least some of them knew him in a personal, perhaps even intimate way treating him with decorum as a friend and colleague, just maybe perhaps an indication that at least some of their verbal squabbling and sparring was in actuality more playful than adversarial. Second, the Pharisees obviously respected Jesus as a rabbi, affording the suddenly renowned teacher an audience and the deference that is usually reserved for those who are in a collegial relationship, even if Jesus was not a card-carrying member of the club. Of course, at the same time it seems clear that while the Pharisees found Jesus both interesting and intriguing, their suspicion demanded that they keep some safe distance. It is apparent that they certainly were not quite sure just what to do with him or about him. It became apparent that he was one of a kind, a one off, one of one, seriously breaking the mold! That is why the writer usually points out little subtleties, nuances such as “they were watching him closely!” It was like Jesus was the equivalent of a space alien, or perhaps a lab rat, a laboratory experiment. That, and the fact they were always looking to trap him, to keep him on his toes, not only to keep an eye on him but to maintain their false sense of power over him. No doubt they wondered to themselves as to why he just did not seem to want to play ball, to join in their reindeer games, to sign on the dotted line and join their snootily exclusive, often inhospitable, private club! The complexities involved in every encounter and engagement between Jesus and any of the religious authorities must have been exhausting, taxing at so many levels, yes, a might

overwhelming, absolutely draining! Imagine what it must have been like for Jesus and his entourage, those loyal and faithful disciples. Even so, never a dull moment!

Jesus, as he was prone to do, reads the room, paying close attention to all those who have gathered for the festivities. He watches, intently watches! He observes, myopically observes! He is laser focused! Silently he takes in everything he sees, every move they make! With precision he stealthily takes inventory, compiling copious internal notes as he prepares to make his opening remarks, his soon-to-be revealed observations, yes, call them revelations. Yes, he watches them even as they watch him! It is like a game of cat and mouse! Reminds me of the old *Mad Magazine* spoof, "Spy vs. Spy!" Oh, what fun! The mystery, the intrigue, the subterfuge, poker faces all refusing to blink, none willing to show their cards. And then, at just the right moment he seizes the moment, what would become another bellwether moment in Chronos time, our timing, as if time were frozen, standing still, a Kairos time, God's timing, that Jesus knows and picks, he pounces, speaking with crystal clear transparency, all eyes fixed upon him, all ears wide open to him. Let the games begin! His interpretation of the proceedings taking place before him is dead red, spot on, just as we would anticipate, expecting nothing less!

Sometime after Jesus' death, the writer of the Book of James must have recalled an oral story similar to this dinner-bell event, perhaps even this same one, because the parallels, despite their differences, are all too familiar, very much alike. Evidently the same recurring problem was recurring, but this time in terms of those gathered for worship! Of course, the key is that this too is a hospitality text! The writer laments, "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" The writer then provides the appropriate commentary, a part of which is the reminder that if you desire to fulfill the law, that you must be loving, yes, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself!" It means exuding grace, mercy, and peace in everything you say and do! In other words, partiality, a blatant form of segregation and exclusion, will get you nowhere, an egregious transgression! These reflections are the exact same message Jesus sought to send at a certain dinner party long, long ago! When you arrive at a social soiree, do not assume that you are the honored guest and sit at seats reserved for those special, VIP, individuals. No, go to the lowest place and wait and see what happens. Who knows? You might be invited to get up and to move up to the higher or even highest place, a moment that everyone in the room will see and therefore know. An extravagant invitation indeed! The worst thing imaginable, however, would be to get nice and settled, to get comfortable in your chair, this finest, choicest, seat of privilege and prestige, and summarily have to be politely asked to get up out of said seat of superiority and be shuffled in front of God and everybody to

a lower or even the lowest station. How awkward for everybody in the room! Jesus concludes his mini sermon, call it a “sermonette,” with a zinger we all remember all too well, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted!” Yes, once again, in Jesus’ world the greatest are the least and the first are the last! That is how Jesus rocked and rolled, the way the realm of God rolls, here and hereafter! Points well made! Jesus then adds for a reinforcing effect, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters—I love how Jesus is careful and intentional to include women in his object lessons—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!” And I can almost hear Jesus now saying, and just forget about, skip the superfluous “thank you” notes!

What I am hope I have conveyed in this sermon in response to these rich biblical stories, is that I have begun to unlock, untap for you some material I assume is oft overlooked, that biblical, theological, hospitality affords us a whole new perspective, new avenues, new pathways for discovery, a whole new world of possibility, yes, even a new way of reading the Bible. This is my hope and prayer, my humblest goal! At the same time, as the writer of Ecclesiastes infers, there is nothing new under the sun, and all that I am seeking to offer in these sermonic words is nothing new in the least. It has always been there, right under our noses, right in front of our very eyes. Folks, in our most futile and best efforts to welcome all people it is important to remember that we are not the outliers in our radical invitation and inclusion, that we stand squarely with Jesus, standing on his very large shoulders, copying, modeling, his mission and ministry as closely as we are humanly able. Yes, his mission and ministry, his teaching and preaching, was enmeshed in, consumed by, fueled and driven by his desire that all people be made welcome, at home in his peaceable kingdom, a reflection of Isaiah’s prophecy, all persons treated equally, understood as holy creations of God, yes, sacredly created *imago Dei*, in the very image of the Divine. As King would say many years later, all persons judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin or any other surface, simplistic characteristics, no surface observations serving as the shallowest of defining identifiers that only serve to divide, to separate or segregate the global village that Jesus desires desperately become one. Jesus’ way was nothing new, not the exception but the rule, yes, the golden one! Being welcoming and inclusive, open and affirming—at least for now with lower case lettering—was completely consistent with the authentic, genuine, message of Jesus, not an alternative, a weird or wacky, approach that is often incorrectly assessed and accused by those who are opposed to who we are and what we do. In that judgmental posture, they are subsequently therefore opposed to Jesus’ hospitably infused message! We are not freaks of nature! We are not heretics, apostate believers, prevaricators, who have conveniently adapted, accommodated to the prevailing winds of a changing culture, falling victim to the ravages of multi-culturalism, embracing the

nebulous nonsensical aberration called “secular humanism!” No, we do not need to be medicated! Those who do not think that Jesus was the ultimate, the consummate, humanist, simply do not know Jesus! Period! It really is that simple! He put every human being first if they would only allow it! Some may and will choose to be wrong, stubbornly holding on to a backward biblical bias, but it is an incorrect choice that many unfortunately are gladly willing to make in the name of Christ and Christendom. And it is a very sad option indeed! Sometimes things are not a matter of opinion! We must quit being defensive and apologetic, making excuses for daring to follow in Jesus’ precious footsteps, making our own footprints as we go. We must stop being tentative and timid in our belief that all persons comprising the beautiful spectrum of God’s rainbow are honored and valued just as they are! We all need a tweak, but we do not need to be fixed! We do not have to justify our existence as card-carrying Christians! We have a proud witness to proclaim as the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River, a glorious testimony to give. What part of God loves everybody is so damn hard to understand?

Yes, hospitality, in all its myriad welcoming and inclusive forms, in every manifestation reflecting and revealing the very person of the historical Jesus, is normative, routine, ordinary. It is not a new creation, a new invention. I am grateful to be blessed to be one of the harbingers bringing this ancient Near Eastern cultural practice out of mothballs, shedding light upon it while bringing it into the light of a new and hospitable day. Yes, it is time to flip the script! It is time to take another look at the biblical narrative as if for the first time! I hope that today is giving you a glimpse of the way I seek to bring my prized research, my scholarship, whatever that may be, into my work as a pastoral minister. They go hand-in-hand, hand-in-glove, enmeshed to the point that I never fully realize where one begins and the other ends. And today I am inviting you to join me on a hospitality journey that will begin on Wednesday night, September 7th, at 6:30 pm under the guise of “Coffeology,” which allows me to take this train wherever it leads and wherever you decide it should go. We will examine specific texts that most reveal what I have come to call biblical, theological, hospitality, but will allow that subject to be a springboard into any and all areas of discussion, answering whatever questions, biblical, theological, and otherwise, you might bring to the table. I hope you will come and be a part of the fun! I promise it will be kicks and giggles and full of biblical information that I believe is most relevant in the Christian world today and will be useful in your own private study, in your own personal pilgrimage as you navigate your own unique spiritual paths! Thank you for the privilege of letting me share what I think you can fully see, and experience is a subject, a seriously important topic that is indeed near and dear to my heart, the passion that drives me daily and I hope will rub off just a little and perhaps inspire you to new heights as well.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and desires for us to be as hospitable to others as God has been unto us. Amen and amen.