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Proper 17C
Peace, Seattle
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Luke 14:1, 7-14; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

HUNGRY FOR HOSPITALITY

I had 550 miles behind me, and another 450 to go when my ride dropped me off 50 miles west of the Alaska – Yukon border, at a little place called Tok Junction.

After working a summer job on the Alaska Railroad, I was spending my final days journeying from Homer to Haines, where I planned to hop a ferry and cruise the Inside Passage down to Seattle, arriving at PLU in time for the new school year.

I didn't own a car, but I had a thumb! And—so far at least—I'd found success when I'd stuck it out to ask for a ride.

But Tok Junction was in the middle of nowhere, and I wasn't so sure my good fortune was going to last. There was a little service station with a store that doubled as café, and that was about it—the only fuel and hot meal for hundreds of miles in any direction. I stepped into the café to grab something to eat and to see if anyone was heading east, but there were no takers.

So after a modest lunch I went outside and took up my place by the sign pointing to Haines.
It was then that I noticed the messages scrawled on the sign's backside…secret missives left by previous hitchhikers for the benefit, I suppose, of those who came after.

"ONE CAR, TWO DAYS," read one of them.

"THREE DAYS AND I'M [blank] OUT OF LUCK," read another.

"DEAR GOD, GET ME OUT OF THIS HELLHOLE!" implored a third.

This was not promising information!

As I read the other messages, my fingers found the wooden cross I'd been wearing the whole journey —a cross a friend's father had made for me—and I said a prayer, determined not to be discouraged.

Less than a half-hour later, my angel arrived, driving a big ole' Oldsmobile sedan completely encased in road-hardened mud and dirt. When I saw his brake lights I ran over and reached for the door.

HOW FAR? I asked.
HAINES, he said.
ME TOO, I smiled, unable to contain my glee.
GET IN, he said, IF YOU HELP WITH THE DRIVING, WE CAN BE THERE BY MORNING.

And you know what? We were.

Now I'm not an advocate of hitchhiking, per se. What I did 35 years ago is not something I'm recommending—especially to you, young people.

But I am an advocate of giving yourself the opportunity of going to a place where you are challenged to trust deeply in the hospitality both of God and of your fellow human beings.

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Being on the receiving end of that kind of hospitality—when something is at stake for us—enables us to be more responsive in turn, when we encounter those who are on the needy end of the equation.

It is this kind of deep solidarity to which the writer of Hebrews calls us when he writes:

> DO NOT NEGLECT TO SHOW HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS, FOR BY DOING THAT SOME HAVE ENTERTAINED ANGELS WITHOUT KNOWING IT. 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…DO NOT NEGLECT TO DO GOOD AND TO SHARE WHAT YOU HAVE, FOR SUCH SACRIFICES ARE PLEASING TO GOD.

The life to which the gospel calls us is a life of unreserved hospitality and radical trust.

Jesus does much of his teaching around this topic, particularly in Luke's gospel, while sharing dinner at people's homes.

Invitations to dinner, seating charts, and table manners were clearly defined in the mid-eastern world of Jesus. Meals of the kind portrayed in today's gospel were carefully constructed social events that linked social equals together; a social networking vehicle to which only qualified peers were invited.

The setting today—a meal hosted by a Pharisee on the Sabbath—pretty much guaranteed a high bar, with a guest list of other Pharisees and perhaps a few civic or religious leaders thrown in.

Luke's tip in verse one: THEY WERE WATCHING HIM CLOSELY, makes us wonder if the whole thing isn't a set up. On the other hand, maybe host and guests are recalling a story they'd heard about how Jesus handled (or mishandled, depending on your perspective) things the last time he sat at table with a group of Pharisees. (Luke 7:36-50)

But if they are watching Jesus closely, Jesus, clearly, is also returning the favor!
Noticing how transparently they jockey for places of honor, he tells them a parable that at once exposes their self-advocating strategies and turns the whole gathering on its head.

> FOR ALL WHO EXALT THEMSELVES WILL BE HUMBLED, he concludes, AND THOSE WHO HUMBLE THEMSELVES WILL BE EXALTED.

But the final coup de grâce comes when Jesus, turning to the host says,

> YOU KNOW, THESE DINNERS FOR PEERS KIND OF MISS THE POINT. IF YOU'RE GOING TO THROW A PARTY, INSTEAD OF INVITING COLLEAGUES—WHO WILL REPAY YOU WHEN IT'S THEIR TURN—INVITE THE POOR, THE CRIPPLED, THE LAME, THE BLIND [who can never reciprocate.]

The central meal which grew out of this teaching of Jesus and the practice of his disciple community is the communion meal we celebrate each week with Christians around the world.

…Not that the transition from the engrained social practice of a meal by peers for peers to an open table welcoming both genders and all social classes was an easy one! It was most certainly not!

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In his first letter to the Corinthian community, Paul spends much of the 11th chapter taking issue with their practice of the Lord's Supper.

> WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER, Paul fumes, IT IS NOT REALLY TO EAT THE LORD'S SUPPER. FOR WHEN THE TIME COMES TO EAT, EACH OF YOU GOES AHEAD WITH YOUR OWN SUPPER, AND ONE GOES HUNGRY AND ANOTHER BECOMES DRUNK. WHAT! DO YOU NOT HAVE HOMES TO EAT AND DRINK IN? OR DO YOU SHOW CONTEMPT FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD AND HUMILIATE THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING? WHAT SHOULD I SAY TO YOU? SHOULD I COMMEND YOU? IN THIS MATTER I DO NOT COMMEND YOU! [1 Cor. 11:20-22]

The central issue for Paul was discernment of THE BODY—by which he means not the BREAD that's used in the meal but the COMMUNITY ITSELF—the BODY OF CHRIST.

> EXAMINE YOURSELVES, Paul implores them, AND ONLY THEN EAT OF THE BREAD AND DRINK OF THE CUP. FOR ALL WHO EAT AND DRINK WITHOUT DISCERNING THE BODY, EAT AND DRINK JUDGMENT AGAINST THEMSELVES. [1 Cor. 11:28-29]

In other words, when we gather around the Table of the Lord we are to regard each other person as brothers and sisters for whom Christ also has died. [Dietrich Bonhoeffer] We are to remember how God has fashioned us into a community of faith, hope, and love through the death and resurrection of Jesus. **This meal we share is both deeply personal and unabashedly social.**

Today, and each month, on food bank Sunday we bring food from our own homes so we can share and extend the abundance and hospitality we receive from Christ beyond these doors and into the community, and through this provision we as Christ's body become hosts and providers for others who hunger—both literally and spiritually.

Nothing says YOU ARE WELCOME HERE like bread broken and meal shared.

God's radical hospitality to us is so clearly evident in the way in which Christ invites to his Table all who hunger and thirst.

- Sometimes that hunger shows itself in the need to be accepted as I am—for who I am.
- And sometimes that hunger is an inner appetite for a place of true belonging.
- Sometimes our hunger deepens when we recognize that old ways of meeting needs only leave us lost and empty.
- And sometimes that hunger is a ravenous longing to be filled with forgiveness and to begin again.

We are all beggars, said Brother Martin**, telling other beggars where bread may be found.**

Whatever your hunger this morning, whatever your need, Christ will meet you here, just as he promised. And you'll leave with another appetite…to find other beggars to tell them where bread is to be found.

Amen.