

Sermons at St Paul's

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

At our noontime Wednesday Eucharist this past week, our little congregation heard Manny tell us a story about the Berlin Wall, back when it separated East and West Berlin under the Communist/Western European partition. (You may also read this story in the *Weekly Happenings* newsletter.) Manny said that there was a day when the East Germans dumped garbage over the wall. The West Germans did not retaliate, but dumped provisions – good quality food -- over their side of the wall to feed and support their brothers and sisters under Communist control.

Manny said the moral of the story was simple: “We each give what we have.”

The story we hear today in our gospel and Old Testament lesson is exactly that – but told in 180 degree reverse perspective.

In the book of Sirach, the prophet, we hear the warning: ***“The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.”***

The story Manny told has to do with not withdrawing our hearts from our Maker. It has to do with giving love and support, not with angry or resentful taking or retaliating.

What would it mean to give what we have? Guess what – this is not theoretical. We do it every single day. If what is inside us is anger or fear, hatred or resentment, that is what we give the world. We cannot prevent ourselves from giving the world what is inside ourselves. Whether we dump garbage or provisions over the wall, whether we continue to make demands that feed our own egos or whether we soften and tend others’ hurts and pains, we need to remember the prophet Sirach: ***“The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.”***

So we hear the Epistle today and its injunctions about mutual love, and think what that might mean in our daily lives. Then we hear this gospel passage, which seems simple on the face of it. Perhaps it is just Uncle Jesus’ advice to the socially inept. But, like most of Jesus’ sayings it is packed with a ton of insight about human behavior.

To make sense of it, we need to understand the social environment in which Jesus lived. It was as complex and multi-cultural as our own. Such societies are hard to negotiate, because all the rules – the things that go without saying – seem not to work any longer.

In the 1950's and '60's a brilliant anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, described one way to understand how societies worked: he said they were *low-context* or *high context*. In high-context societies, everyone knows how to behave and what language to use, because there is great homogeneity and agreement. Traditional villages and stable political climates often foster high-context societies. By contrast, rapidly changing non-traditional societies – often with multiple ethnic groups – are low-context. In them, it can feel as though you are constantly negotiating your social interactions, words and behavior.

Jesus' childhood was spent in the high-context setting of Nazareth, a traditional Jewish village. His family regularly travelled to Jerusalem for holy days and feasts, and that was a low-context setting. The difference between high-context village life where everyone knew their place, and cosmopolitan, Roman-occupied Jerusalem, full of Jews with variant beliefs as well as travelers from a dozen different countries, must have struck the young Jesus.

Years later, invited to a Pharisee leader's house to eat a meal on the Sabbath, Jesus watched the other guests with interest. He saw how they eyed each other, trying to decide who outranked them, and whom they outranked. As they assembled, it would be like a game of musical chairs.

From what we know of the dining customs among the wealthy of that era, they would have been sitting in an assembly space enjoying a first course of appetizers while the other guests arrived. This was also a sorting-out time, allowing people to move up or down the room as they figured out where to take their places. So Jesus' advice was first of all practical – don't assume too high a place until you know who is going to be present or you might find yourself yielding your seat to someone else.

Then, when all the guests had arrived, the host would lead them in order of rank to an upper room where the main meal would be served, and they would recline on low couches on their left sides, so that they could eat with their right hands, as was proper. As the main meal ended, Jesus as the honored guest would be invited to address the party.

So he began a parable of attending a wedding feast, and probably got knowing nods for the first part of his address. Then he turned to his host, and gave him some stunning advice.

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers 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.

Oh boy! Can you imagine the looks on the men's faces? The whole point of such gatherings was to see and be seen with the most eminent men of Jerusalem. Invite the defective? What was this crazy prophet suggesting? If you were seen hob-nobbing with the lame, the crippled, or the poor, you would lose status, and status was everything!

If we look at this scene through Edward Hall's eyes, we are seeing Jesus recommending a high-context behavior in a low-context setting. It was revolutionary! What goes without saying for Jesus is that all of God's children are equal and should be treated that way. Today we might say: all lives matter and every life matters. To the men assembled on this Sabbath, it must have been stunning advice: to give an invitation without considering which eminent, wealthy man would invite you in return to his feast would be socially idiotic. Why would you give, if not to get?

Now let's go back to the moral of Manny's story that I repeated at the beginning of this sermon: We each give what we have. Does this help us hear Jesus' parable in a new way?

Jesus' advice is to give what you have --in this case, hospitality – without counting what you will get back. If you give garbage, you may get provisions. If you give provisions, you may not get anything. Leave cereal or peanut butter in the food cupboard bin in the narthex, and you'll probably never hear about it again.

What do guests at our communion table, God's banquet, give each other in Jesus 'name? Jesus tells us that along with hospitality, we are to give love – the very love he gave us when he suffered, died and rose for us. We each give what we have. He had love. Jesus gave love. We have Jesus, our Christ.

Yes, at this feast we welcome in the name of love, the poor, the sick, the lame and everyone who seeks Jesus. We invite them to come and eat, because we are indeed sure that we will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Amen.