

Denice K. Leslie  
October 7, 2007  
World Communion Sunday  
20<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
Luke 14: 12-14  
Hebrews 13: 1 – 8

### “Welcome to the Table!”

In my first appointment I served as a co-pastor with my husband, Kim. That was in St. Helena. The parsonage had a combined kitchen dining area. Not long after we moved in we decided to strip the very outdated wall paper off the dining area wall. We were doing this work a little at a time, around the edges of work so the dining area was, as you can imagine a huge mess.

This one afternoon an older couple in the congregation who lived all the way up in the hills at some considerable distance away were in town to take care of business and planned to just stay all day until the church Council meeting that evening. Kim and I asked them to come to dinner.

So I rushed home and did my best to put together a casserole, move the ladder and work tools and clear off the table.

Now it was a very, very hot day and I realized we needed a beverage. There was a filled two cup Pyrex measuring cup on the counter and as soon as I saw it I thought, “O good! Kim has made some tea and I’ll just ice it down,” which I did.

Kim and our guests arrived within the hour and everyone sat down. As I got the main dish out of the oven, I invited everyone to have a glass of ice tea.

Our guests helped themselves to a large glass, took a big drink and abruptly put their glasses down on the table. I didn’t take much notice until Kim took a drink of his, stood up, removed the glasses and the pitcher and, without explanation began to make new tea.

Later I found out why: it was hair rinse!

O yes! I could write a book about our pastoral adventures in hospitality! You don’t want to eat at the Leslie’s-you might get poisoned!

Today is World Communion Sunday—the day when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper with Christians all around the world! The day when we as Christians do our best to demonstrate that God makes a place at the table for everyone.

I love the image of Christians everywhere communing all through this 24 hour period all over the globe! Christians from every nation, culture and denomination communing on the same day.

What a positive, uplifting and harmonious action! How we long for Isaiah’s great banquet table set with a feast of fat things for all God’s people to be a reality in our war torn and divided world. For that matter within the divided Body of Christ. It is a great shame that Christians of one denomination or another do not permit other believers to commune at their table of the Lord because of the assumption that we are not all true Christians!

Let’s face it, the world we live in today is not a very hospitable place, is it? In point of fact we live in a world of fear.

Our attitude about life has changed greatly since 9/11. We aren’t as trusting of people as we once were.

This month is the anniversary of the Amish School house shootings. Out of the blue a milk man with a grudge against God enters a school house and shoots 10 Amish children and, then, as the police burst in, takes his own life.

The war in Iraq grinds on, with an insatiable appetite for blood and chaos succeeding in making terrorism an every day word on television news channels.

When we board a plane we take off our shoes, and empty our pockets and divide up our liquid toiletries into small three ounce bottles.— We walk through metal detectors. On international flights our luggage is opened and searched.

For a while we were very suspicious of our mail. The yellow and orange terror alerts seem to have faded away—but the anxiety they’ve produced has not.

Our fear, our distrust grows. I recently heard about a Sunday School teacher who informed a class of small children that Muslims

are evil people who worship an evil god and that Islam is an evil religion! Forgetting that we worship the same God, share the origins of our faith in Father Abraham and that Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet.

Fear. Fear does horrible and irrational things to people. It divides us, it causes us to clutch a fortress mentality—to pull away from others and pull together with our kind, our family, our economic class, our race, our culture, our religion, --our nation and ban together against the unseen enemy.

The enemy becomes less than human. I was riveted with the Ken Burns documentary on World War II. The immensity of the war effort, the savagery and sheer drudgery of the fighting year in and year out; the incredible waste and loss of life—the fire bombing of cities like London and Dresden, the hatred that grew as the war raged among the American, German and Japanese soldiers.

Each with an assumption of moral superiority. And all of this was skillfully set off with interviews of veterans whom we followed through the war—watching as their lives are wrenched from supportive community, families and loved ones, many thousands never to return again—the majority of the world caught up in this massive vortex of violence, struggle and heroic sacrifice... But through it all, the amazing ability of humanity to persist in the face of such organized inhumanity.

Today the issues are different but the fear and fortress mentality are the same: Divide and conquer! To the strong goes the victory. The enemy can't be as human or God fearing as we are. And the goal? Security. But security sought through further division is the true illusion. Jesus shows us another way.

Today Jesus says to us, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers, or your relatives or rich neighbors who in return will invite you back.... Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind and you will be blessed....”

Jesus is most definitely speaking about compassion for the less fortunate. But he's also saying much more. In Jesus' day the majority of

the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind were assumed to be sinners whose suffering was divinely ordained—in other words they were crippled or lame or blind because of their or their family's sin. They really believed God made them this way.

And faithful people didn't eat with just anyone—there were laws governing what was clean and unclean and who were clean and unclean.

Jesus isn't just talking about being kind to the powerless; Jesus is talking about including those we feel morally superior to. Those who are outside of our definition of persons deserving of our understanding and attention. Those we condemn.

It is Jesus after all who teaches us to love our enemies as ourselves. Who says to us, “What good does it do you to love those who love you?” It is Jesus who breathed forgiveness for his murderer's from the cross.

Jesus' practices and teaches a radically inclusive hospitality—the kind God has for all of us. Because, people, the only antidote to fear is community and community is built when we are hospitable to one another.

Jesus calls us to extend hospitality to the stranger. To those radically different from ourselves. And that means making a huge effort to understand, to screw up our courage and reach out into unknown territory. To open ourselves to the stranger with no presumptions.

If you break apart the word assume you can see how making assumptions makes an ass out of you and me. Think of the times you have assumed something about someone, like your spouse, and then based your reaction on that assumption. And so your feelings are hurt. Then you discover what you thought was true isn't at all—and how do you feel? Awful! Kim and I spend a lot of time apologizing to each other for silly assumptions.

It's the same when we encounter a different culture. Let me give you an example. When we were beginning the Hmong speakers congregation, Pastor Kham Dy and I were

teaching a membership class in one of the Sunday school rooms on a Thursday night. The potluck had just started up and I invited members of the class to join us.

Now in our Western European Anglo culture, when someone invites you to a meal you do what? You say, O how kind of you; feel really touched and then you say no thank you. And if they don't insist you know they were being polite—it's the polite thing to do to offer but you don't always expect to be taken up on the invitation. Right?

But in Hmong culture what it means to be polite is entirely different. If someone comes into your home you offer them something. If you only have an apple and there are ten people, you cut that apple into ten pieces.

And this works the other way as well.

If someone offers you something to eat it is very, very rude not to accept. And the greater the status of the person making the invitation, the ruder it is not to accept. So when I invited the Hmong new member class to come to the potluck, even though they didn't have any food to contribute, they all came! The polite thing to do! Well, the reaction to that situation almost sank us before we got started.

This kind of thing happens a lot because we make assumptions about each other. Assumptions can lead to resentments, unnecessary insults, anger and self-righteous conclusions. This is how barriers are built around our differences. We don't understand other people's religion or culture or language--we easily believe what we've heard simply because we know the person who told us—or we are perfectly capable of jumping to our own totally erroneous conclusions. We don't check things out for ourselves. We need to be more like the press!

With the anniversary of the Amish school house shootings, astonished reporters kept reporting over and over again how the Amish, immediately after the deaths of their children, forgave the killer. Reached out to his widow and family. Went to the killer's funeral! When asked why they went to the funeral they said, “Because it was the right thing to do.”

When asked how they could forgive the killer, the response of these Anabaptist folks whose ancestors were killed by the thousands by protestant Lutherans and Roman Catholics alike shared what Jesus had taught them through their own suffering. They issued a statement which said,

Forgiveness is a journey we take with the help of God. Once we can forgive we release our selves, free ourselves because once we can forgive we are no longer hostages to hostility....

**And hostility destroys community. (pause) If you get nothing else out of this sermon this morning, take this fact home with you today!**

The Amish understand, indeed all Christians need to understand from the life, ministry and death of Jesus: the only way that really leads to true security is the overcoming of hostility in this world through hospitable actions, forgiveness and reaching out. Because this is what makes for true understanding, mutual affection and respect. This is what builds true community and ends fear and distrust.

Jesus asks us to remember that he calls us not to do life the “American” way or the “Hmong” way, but, as the Amish have demonstrated for us in the midst of their tragedy, the Jesus Way.

The Jesus Way is to reach out and see every person as a child of God, every culture as a different expression of what it means to be human; remembering we are all made in the image of God and can therefore learn from one another.

After all, as the writer of Hebrews says to us this morning, let mutual love continue and do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Let us be the evangel—the angel—the messenger carriers of God's hospitality, overcoming fear and distrust with hospitality, building God's true community.