

## **Humility and Hospitality**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Episcopal Church  
Pentecost 14, Proper 17, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary  
September 2, 2007

This past spring, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams issued the once-a-decade invitations to the 2008 Lambeth Palace Conference. These coveted invitations were sent out to nearly every Anglican bishop in the world—except to a select few. One of those was Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, whose sexual orientation has created a firestorm of problems in the Anglican Communion. Another was Martyn Minns, an Episcopal priest consecrated a ‘bishop’ of the newly formed Convocation of Anglicans in North America, a conservative group spearheaded by Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria.

Needless to say, who was invited to Lambeth—and who was not—is a subject of much interest in some quarters. There are those leaders in the Global South provinces (most in Africa) that say they may boycott Lambeth altogether, because bishops who supported Robinson’s consecration have been invited. There are a few who are upset that Minns has not been invited or recognized as bishop. There are a number of bishops, as well, that are considering declining Lambeth’s invitation as a demonstration of solidarity with Bishop Robinson. Our esteemed Anglican bishops—the leaders of our Communion—are behaving like a squabbling family feuding over who is invited to the wedding.

Such jockeying for position, including using the threat of not attending as a demonstration of power, is akin to the influential dinner that Jesus was invited to attend. Such dinners are not necessarily for the food and fun—these are gatherings that one goes to in order to be ‘seen.’ After all, the host was a leader of the Pharisees—and Jesus was not just any guest; he was a guest of great interest. His every word, every move, was noted and judged. Like an Eliza Doolittle being watched by a hawkish Henry Higgins at a formal royal affair, Jesus’ piety was being graded most carefully.

## **Humility and Hospitality**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Episcopal Church  
Pentecost 14, Proper 17, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary  
September 2, 2007

I daresay many of us have been to such affairs. Perhaps we haven't been under as much scrutiny as Jesus—or even Eliza Doolittle—but we've felt those watchful eyes upon us all the same. The corporate party, the interview, even the first time meeting of a significant other's family—all can be occasions of anxiety. We are tempted to turn inward, focusing totally on our own selves and 'how we're doing'. And sometimes, in our desire to impress, to succeed, to be noticed and fit in, we lose ourselves along the way.

Jesus, however, refrains from status seeking. Instead of seeking to be noticed, he notices others. In a part left out of this gospel reading, he notices a man afflicted with a disease and heals him. He observes each guest, who they are, and how they seek places of honor. Their concern is not for their fellow guests, or for someone else's comfort; their concern is how close they can get to the seat of honor, to stake their claim to being special, to get others to notice them. And isn't that a natural human tendency? Infants complain if they feel they are not getting their due attention from mom or dad; young children say "look at me!" when they want to demonstrate a new skill. Our entire modern culture (and from the sound of it, Jesus' culture) is built on achievement, becoming the star, the hero, of gaining recognition. We talk a lot about being team players, but all too often, we are playing on a team of one. After all, we train people to be leaders, not followers.

But Jesus asks us to be followers—followers of him and his ways, God's ways—and not the world's ways. This means to extend radical hospitality, not just of food and drink but also of attention and respect. A genuine concern for the other is to sit with that lonely person in the back of the room, to help the disabled get to the buffet table and back, to arrange it so the hard of hearing and seeing are sitting up front. After all, true hospitality is product of a generous and

## **Humility and Hospitality**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Episcopal Church  
Pentecost 14, Proper 17, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary  
September 2, 2007

humble spirit, and not just about a lavish groaning board, fancy china, and tasteful decorations.

It is to make the other feel truly at home, wanted, special—without passing any tests. When we do so, then every seat feels like a seat of honor. When we do that, the mutual love we are called to continues.

However, it is not enough to share hospitality with those in our own circle, remaining in our societal comfort zone. Jesus reminds us that this radical hospitality is to extend to all—even those unlike us, those that make us uncomfortable, even those that don't 'deserve' it. He tells his host that he should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind—all classes of people that the Pharisees would have avoided as 'unclean'. Jesus asks him to do his share to break down the barriers we build, to take notice of those on the margins as God does, to invite the powerless into the circle of power.

Who would be those on the fringes today? Who are our invisible people? The poor, homeless, the uneducated, the day laborer, the disabled? I'm sure you can think of many others. And yet all are welcome at God's table—and we are asked to make them welcome at our own. After all, we cannot in good conscience declare that we *deserve* a place at God's table, in God's house—for all we are and have been given is due to the extravagant generosity of a loving God. And so we are charged to share the same spirit of hospitality with everyone around us, to give as we have been given to. We are called, as our Epistle writer states, 'to show hospitality to strangers'—those different from us, those not known to us—for perhaps then we shall be entertaining angels—messengers of God's love and care.

But it is not easy, this 'breaking bread' with those different from us, perhaps even hostile to us. It involves risk, opening ourselves to the opportunity that we will be changed by this

## **Humility and Hospitality**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Episcopal Church  
Pentecost 14, Proper 17, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary  
September 2, 2007

encounter. The stranger may become a friend; we may see things with new eyes, become aware of injustices that we never knew existed. Most scary of all, we may be forced to examine long-cherished opinions or beliefs, even to point of discarding them for a new outlook. This is uncomfortable, even painful stuff. And yet, if we look at the whole of Jesus' ministry in ancient Palestine, that is what he was calling people to do—and still is.

Desmond Tutu, former Archbishop of South Africa, wrote a letter to that effect regarding the Lambeth Conference. In it, he urged Rowan William, Archbishop of Canterbury, to invite all bishops to the table, including Robinson and Minns. He implores all Anglican bishops to be “more welcoming and inclusive of one another.” No family agrees on everything—but we are all family, and families work things out together. For, he said, “we are most like God when we are welcoming and when we are as inclusive as possible, when we have broken down all middle walls of partition.” Walls that we were asked to never build in the first place.

Open wide the door, and put out the welcome mat. Do good, and share. The angels are waiting. Amen.