**15 Pentecost, Jer 2:4-13, Ps 81, Heb 13: 1-16, Luke 14: 1,7-14, Rev Mary S. Trainor**

There we were at the Thanksgiving dinner table: me, my parents, three teenage girls, and two young navy sailors. We lived not far from the Great Lakes Naval Station and my father had been in the Navy in World War II. My parents had big hearts, so each year they would invite one or two young sailors to join us for Thanksgiving dinner. After the turkey and side dishes were on the table and grace was said, the awkwardness began. Oh, my parents did fine talking with these young handsome men in their dress blues - but we girls had never been so silent during a meal as when these strangers joined us. We never did see them again, but, oh, my parents understood our Epistle and Gospel lessons for today.

Our reading from Hebrews began with these words, "***let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it"*** When we hear this passage, we quickly key on the word "***angels***;" we are fascinated with angels. There are so many wonderful stories of angels rescuing people; these stories are so full of hope. But, what are angels really, what do they look like, and where are they? Angels are not dressed in white, swooping down with big wings on their backs, as depicted in movies. Angels are not people who have died and who have come back. Angels are messengers of God. The bible tells us clearly that we are not to worship angels (Col 2:18), but rather we are to worship only God. Angels look like other people around us, so we can't distinguish them in our midst. Any stranger could turn out to be a messenger from God who has come to bless us. Why, who is to say whether or not those navy guys at my family Thanksgiving dinner table were angels or not? Yes, angels are strangers -- yet in this world of uncertainty, we are wary of strangers, of those we do not know.

Hospitality is defined as: "**friendly, generous reception of guests, visitors, or strangers."** The root of the word "hospitality" is derived from a Latin word that means stranger. "Hospitality" makes us think of Martha Stewart, entertaining, the 3 C's: cleaning, cooking and chores - and you might think: "ugh." Many of us don't like to do these things! But wait, hospitality is much broader than these things, it is something that all of us do all the time -- it is a way of living every day, it is a Christian ethic. In our Baptismal Covenant we say we will "**see and serve Christ in all persons...and...respect the dignity of every human being.** So, being hospitable means to reach out in love to those we know and those we don't know. If we aren't hospitable with those we don't know, we might be missing out on seeing Christ or His angels. Jesus taught about this in a practical sense in today's Gospel. This was a lesson I learned the hard way.

A long time back when I lived in California, I had a social life that was very predictable. Each week or two we would have a dinner party or go to a dinner party; a tight circle of people, all the same age and background, emerged as friends. The circle of friends had the unwritten rule of reciprocity: if you were invited over, you had to invite them over in return. And, the circle of friends got really good when someone of a higher rank at work decided to join us -- then we all felt really important. We wanted not only to entertain them, but we wanted to go to their nicer houses and sit next to them! My, and my friends back then, were not unique: being with important people makes us all feel more important. Just watch in various contexts when people get so excited because they have had the opportunity to get near to, shake the hand of, or get autographs from, celebrities or professional athletes! In today's Gospel Jesus, "***noticed how the guests chose the places of honor;"*** the highest places. Then, Jesus gives His lesson on Christian hospitality. Jesus tells us to "***sit down at the lowest places... those who humble themselves will be exalted."*** He even gives us specific instructions for when we have people over. He said, ***"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... invite*** ***the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.***" Jesus discards that unwritten rule of reciprocity, telling us that we are to reach out especially to those who "***cannot repay"*** us. Whew -- this sure brought me up short and changed me! Jesus changes the rules of the game for us all, redefining our understanding of hospitality!

Once upon a time, a young boy was walking in a park, when he saw an elderly gentlemen sitting on a bench. The boy sat down and proceeded to talk and eventually share his snack of Twinkies. They spent an hour together, and then as it was getting dark, the little boy went home to his mother, and the older man to his wife. When the boy got home, he shouted to mother – “**Mom, Mom, you’ll never guess who I saw in the park today! I ate Twinkies with God! He had white hair and loving eyes, and he talked with me like I was his only son**.” The older man went home to his wife excited too. “**Martha, you’ll never guess who I saw in the park today! I ate Twinkies with God**.”

There are many ways to be hospitable; we don't have to host someone in our homes to be hospitable. Jesus had no real home, as He traveled around all the time, yet He was always hospitable - to all kinds of strangers. Our Hebrews reading even points out: "***Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them....and those who are being tortured."*** This sounds even more difficult than reaching out to strangers. How do we do these things? We are reassured the ***Lord is our helper, we are not to be afraid.*** There are people right in this neighborhood who would love to receive hospitality from us. One of our goals in this church is to be inviting, to be welcoming! Our greatest expression of Christian hospitality is right here at the Communion table, open to all baptized. At this table God invites us all, broken and forgiven, to receive Him and begin again: radical hospitality!

Next Sunday, at our Fall Kickoff here at St. John's, we have a wonderful opportunity to make strangers feel welcome. I issue each of you the challenge to invite at least one new person to church next Sunday.

"***Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it***." Amen.