

April 18, 2021

The Third Sunday of Easter, Year B

The Rev. Paula Jefferson

You are witnesses of these things

State Highway 49 is Main Street in the town of Elkland Pennsylvania. My parents' home abuts the road. From the front porch, you look across rooftops to the hill beyond...the hilltop marks the imaginary line between NY and PA. Many mornings I've jogged a mile to straddle the state line...and to be able to tell my unsuspecting Texas friends that I ran all the way to New York state.

Between hills, there's a tight, and closed, community who live in the Cowanesque Valley...a valley that stretches between many villages.

In July of 2017, I picked up my dad from hospital. Hospice was invading my parents' home and preparing to help dad transition from this life to the next. Each day for the first week, Dad and I sat on the front porch. By mid-morning on the first day, cars over-flowed the driveway ... and then folks jumped the curb and parked in the front yard. People sat on the porch, on the steps, in the yard, anywhere to be present.

One man...about my age...was unforgettable.

My Dad's memory was unusual. Just a few years earlier, from his living room, he directed me to a particular restaurant in Rome, Italy ... a city he had not visited since he was stationed there at the end of WWII. Dad was known for his memory.

The man who came to see him had something particular on his mind. His father had died when he was a baby...he wanted to learn about his biological father. Do you remember him? Was he kind? Was he athletic?

The Gospel lesson begins with the disciples sitting around talking about Jesus. They have seen him, risen. Yet, when he appears among them--without ringing the doorbell--they are frightened. Is this a ghost? It seems that, when Jesus is doing human-like things, the disciples recognize him. But when Jesus does things that we cannot rationalize, our ability to see *Christ* is inadequate.

I've been reading Rowan Williams' book called...*"Being Christian"*. In a chapter titled, "Eucharist", Williams says that one of the things in the Gospels that is most remembered about Jesus is his *"indiscriminate generosity and the willingness to mix with unsuitable people"*. To substantiate his observation, Williams cites the case of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector who lived in Jericho...tax collecting was a disliked vocation during Jesus' lifetime because the tax supported the Roman empire. When Jesus goes to Jericho, Zacchaeus hatches a plan to see him. He's worried that he won't be able to see Jesus over the crowd, so Zacchaeus climbs into a tree, where he's above the crowd and hidden by leaves. He watches Jesus approach from his perch.

Jesus stops directly under Zacchaeus, looks up, and asks, hey, aren't you going to invite me to your home for dinner?

Rowan's point is that Jesus is both a person who welcomes, and a person who draws out hospitality from others.

We see that in today's Gospel lesson as well: Jesus asks the frightened disciples, "Have you anything here to eat?" He *is drawing the disciples out of fear into hospitality*.

On the front porch, I watched Dad process the request to reminisce about his early life. He was tired, physically and emotionally. He understood the gift he was being asked to offer.

Dad did know this man's father; dad was a few years older, but they were raised in the same village...he talked about him, places and times where their lives intersected, the memories—stored in my dad's mind--of a man who had been gone for decades. Dad witnessed a life that mattered deeply to this particular person.

The gift of hospitality extended in both directions. My dad was overwhelmed by what he called "a living wake"...he was drifting into self-pity. The man who came seeking a gift, also gave my father a gift: the opportunity to use his memory and share his legacy with another.

Hospitality is like that...we are drawn from one posture into another.

Williams notes that Jesus' character *to give and to receive hospitality* shows us something essential about the Eucharist. In his words: In the Eucharist, "We are guests of Jesus. We are there because he asks us, and because he wants our company. At the same time, we are set free to invite Jesus into our lives and literally to receive him into our bodies in the Eucharist...We are welcomed and we welcome; we welcome God and we welcome our unexpected neighbors."

The example of Jesus throughout the Gospels is to welcome and to invite us into hospitality...radical hospitality.

Folks are aghast when Jesus goes to the home of a tax collector. But imagine the experience from Zacchaeus' point of view. He is hated among his countrymen because of his job. Who are *his* friends? When was the last time he brought someone home for dinner? His career is all about taking from others. Now Jesus is coming to his home for dinner. His posture changes --he is able to *offer* something...and *this* gift is not going to the Roman Empire. This gift is given to God.

Zacchaeus accepts the invitation to offer hospitality. In that exchange of gift, new community is formed.

In today's Gospel, "When the risen Christ accepts the hospitality of the disciples and eats their fish, it is more than just a proof that Jesus is not a ghost. Jesus is creating new community in his risen life as he did in his earthly life."

And now to the world in front of the text...

Some years ago, I hiked in Big Bend National Park. My base camp was the town of Lajitas. One evening, I asked for a dinner recommendation...where's the best Mexican food nearby? I was directed to a restaurant in Paso Lajitas ... on the other side of the river. We paid \$10 for a man to row us across the river. We were about halfway across... when a pick-up truck passed us. Turns out the river is wide, but less than 18" deep.

In Paso Lajitas we had a fabulous meal. And then we carried our shoes, and walked through the water. Somewhere in this river, there is an imaginary line. On one side: the town of Lajitas. On the other: Paso Lajitas. On one side: The State of Texas. On the other: The State of Chihuahua (Chee-wa-wa). On one side: The United States. On the other: Mexico.

The people who live here speak English and Spanish, and sometimes a curious mix of both.

Their families live on both sides of the imaginary line. Their friends live on both sides. For local folk, the river is like that imaginary line between Pennsylvania and New York.

For governments, these invisible lines are not imaginary. They are lines of demarcation: of ownership, responsibility, and rights. These invisible lines present us with a quandary: what do we do when people cross the lines illegally? People, like my ancestors, who come seeking a better life. In 2019, we had 200 immigration centers housing more than 500,000 people who crossed our borders illegally.

The law responds to immigration as a problem of geography.

But for Christians, geography is just one variable in the problem. We must also consider our witness of Divine hospitality and welcome...Here is an invitation to meet the unsuitable people—the poor, the homeless, the tax collectors of our day--with indiscriminate generosity. To hear these voices saying to us, “Hey, do you have any food here to eat? and to be moved to hospitality.

What is at risk for us to extend radical hospitality? When we offer hospitality, we are drawn from one posture to another....from the economy of *this* world to the *Divine* economy.....from protecting our resources to forming new communities among God’s people.

During Easter, the deacon dismisses us with this charge: Alleluia, Alleluia, Let us Go Forth in the Name of Christ.

We have come and been fed by a Holy meal...God’s welcome to us and God’s hospitality. We extend our hands to welcome Christ into our lives. And now our posture changes...we go forth into the world to extend and receive hospitality in the name of the risen Christ. Like the disciples, we *are* witnesses of Christ’s welcome and hospitality in *this* world.

We must see the world differently. Yes, we see through the lens of law and order. *And* we see through the empty tomb...through the lens of the Risen Christ.

Alleluia. Alleluia. Thanks be to God.

