



**ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA**

*14 Pentecost - Proper 17 - Year C
September 1/2 2007*

Ecclesiasticus 10:(7-11)12-18; Hebrews 13:1-8; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

If you have been around St. Paul's for any length of time at all, you know I almost never begin my sermons by talking about the biblical text. In today's world, it is not safe to assume people are familiar enough with the Bible to just start them right there comfortably. This unfamiliarity is one of the reasons we at St. Paul's place so much emphasis on Bible Study and offer an Introductory Course to the Bible every year .

You should have received your *Parish Life Catalog* earlier this week (If you didn't, go into the office and get one after church). If you read *The Parish Life Catalog* (and I hope you will, we worked awfully hard on it for you), you will see that an Introduction to the Bible begins on Tuesday, October 2 at 7:00 p.m. *That's a plug!* It's one of my favorite courses to teach. This will be the 13th year in a row that I've taught it.

We spend 15 weeks in the Old Testament – which most people really don't know at all but should, since you can't really understand the New Testament without first understanding the Old. After 15 weeks in the Old Testament we move into 15 weeks in the New Testament.

It's great stuff and really worth it. As I said, an Introduction to the Old Testament will begin on Tuesday, October 2 at 7:00 p.m. right after the Foundations for Faith Course which begins that same Tuesday, October 2 at 6:00 p.m. and will run for eight weeks. *That was a plug too!* Foundations for Faith is a great way to get to know more about the Christian Faith and the Episcopal Church.

Anyway, I almost never begin my sermons with the Bible, because I have learned over the years that people just aren't familiar enough with the Bible and if I begin there, they will turn off, get bored, or even go to sleep. But today, I am going to make an exception. Today I am going to begin with the Bible, specifically, with the Gospel reading.

You see, I love this reading. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus goes to the house of one of the Pharisees for dinner. Presumably he was invited. But the text makes it clear, that when he got there, they were watching him. Well, I guess he was something of a celebrity, so it could be that they just wanted to see him. Celebrity gawking. We know about that, don't we?

But I think there's more to it than that. You see, many of the Pharisees didn't really like Jesus a whole lot. There was a reason for this. He was often critical of them. The Pharisees were the religious establishment of their day. They upheld strong moral values and a rigorous reading and application of the Jewish Law, the Torah – the first five books of the Bible.

But as too often happens with many who make a public showing of strong rigorous moral and religious positions many Pharisees didn't live the values they espoused. They were hypocrites. They said one thing, and did another. They judged others and pointed the finger, while they themselves committed all sorts of wrongs...

And it wasn't even so much that they did said one thing and did another that got Jesus worked up...Rather, Jesus was upset that they would look at the behavior of others and judge others with a judgment that should have been reserved for God alone. Today's reading from the Hebrew's is clear - judgment belongs to God.

They declared certain people unacceptable to God, but, often failed to ask the deeper social questions. While the Pharisees often focused on some of the micro-issues of people's personal lives, they paid no attention at all to the macro-issues of social justice and poverty and the welfare of all people. Jesus would often point this out in his preaching and teaching, which is why many of the Pharisees didn't have a great deal of affection for him....They felt threatened by him. He was a "loose cannon." They couldn't be sure what he was going to do or say next! And so, as he entered that Pharisee's house, having been invited to dinner, they watched him. They watched him, very carefully, and did not really welcome him....But the text is clear, he was watching them, too.

And as Jesus watches them, the text tells us that he notices how the guests choose the places of honor at the banquet. And he tells them a parable.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now, I have to tell you....This passage is speaking to me this morning....To be sure, I have a pretty high seat in this church. It can be tempting to let this go to my head....I have a pretty healthy ego. Still, there are lots of things that keep my ego in check on a fairly regular basis....There is, of course, Susan, who is not afraid to let me know when I get too big for my own britches. Our children are also pretty good about this....And if these are not enough, well, there is the dunk tank which I will be getting into later today! Talk about taking the lowest seat!!

These things are good....And they are important....We all need to keep things in perspective.....I am amazed at how entitled so many people often feel and at how badly they treat fellow human beings who happen to occupy the lowest seat....

Even though we live in a democratic country, there is a lot of classicism and elitism. Too often people separate themselves and live into the fiction that one class of people is created more in the image of God than another class. Today's Gospel reading challenges this...Many of the Gospel readings, in fact, challenge this.

Jesus' party is open to anyone who will come, even people like you and me! Jesus extends a particular invitation to those who would not make the "A list" in Palm Beach or Hollywood – the marginalized and outcast; the poor and the sick; those who are often given the lowest seat, if they are given any seat at all....The text makes this clear.

After he tells the parable about people taking the highest seat, he says to the person who invited him, (and presumably the invitation was not given with the most hospitable of intentions), *"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."*

Why is Jesus so concerned about the sick, the poor and the lame? What's so important about them? Well maybe it's because too often, too many of us ignore them or make all kinds of judgments about them or take them for granted or draw all kinds of conclusions that deny them their dignity.....

A couple of weeks ago, I discovered a man asleep on the outdoor bench by the parking lot of St. Paul's. He was heavysset, sweaty, dirty, unshaven and unkempt. I decided he was homeless and was pretty sure that he was waiting for me. Well, not waiting for me exactly, but waiting for "the pastor."

I touched his shoulder. He stirred.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I need a bus ticket. I have \$65.00 and I'm trying to get to Oklahoma City." He had a gentle voice and spoke with an accent. I was pretty sure he was Mexican.

Homeless people come to St. Paul's on a fairly regular basis looking for help. We have "regulars." We also see our share of hucksters and scam artists. Trying to figure out who is a scam artist and who is not and how to respond to genuine needs is often no easy matter. That we have to deal with hucksters and scam artists at all is annoying. I know it colors how I approach nearly all those who come for help. I begin with suspicion. That the man in front of me admitted to having \$65.00 of his own was a good indicator that he was not a huckster.

I can also tell you that when someone asks for help to buy a bus ticket, I am often inclined to say yes. A bus ticket means that they will be leaving town. It is a quick fix. Somewhere, someone else will have to deal with him or her. I won't, that is, if I buy the ticket and see them to the bus. If they are not leaving town, helping can be very time consuming and can sometimes involve hours, days and weeks of work and a lot of frustration, because the truth of the matter is, Palm Beach County is terrible in terms of the services they offer the homeless and needy.

"Do you want to take a bus today?" I asked.

"*Si*, if I can get one."

"Let's go," I said.

We got into the car. I headed toward the local Greyhound Station which is only a few blocks away. It's not a station really. It's the dispatch office of the local taxi company. Greyhound busses stop there on their way up the east coast of Florida from Miami. There is a bench that seats two outside. Otherwise, people sit on the curb or stand around in the heat as they wait for the bus.

“*Come se llamo?*” I asked as we drove south on Federal Highway.

“Juan.”

“Why are you going to Oklahoma, Juan?...*Por que* Oklahoma?”

“To pick tomatoes...It’s tomato season in Oklahoma....I came here to pick beans, but the season is almost over. It’s not been very good. I didn’t make much.”

He shared with me that he had tried to get travel assistance from an agency in West Palm Beach that he had been told was supposed to help farm workers. He hadn’t been successful.

“I just want to get to Oklahoma where I can work and make some money.”

As I pulled into the parking lot, a Greyhound bus was already parked in front. The driver was checking the tickets of passengers preparing to board. Juan and I hurried into the office.

“I want to buy him a ticket to Oklahoma City,” I said to man behind the counter handing him my credit card, actually the church credit card - you all helped me to put Juan on that bus.

“What’s his full name?”

“What’s your full name?” I asked Juan. He said his name and spelled it out for the agent.

“Tell him to ask the driver to wait while I do this,” the agent said to me. Juan ran outside and began speaking to the driver.

“Does he have any bags to check?” the agent asked. Juan had a plastic garbage bag slung over his shoulder. I didn’t think he would want to check it. I stuck my head out the door.

“Juan, you don’t have any bags you want to check, do you?” I asked.

“No, I just have this,” he said pointing to the bag.

The driver looked at me and said, “Tell him I don’t have any seats. The bus is full. He’s going to have to stand all the way to West Palm Beach.”

“Is that okay?” I asked Juan. He shrugged his shoulders. I went in and finished paying for the ticket. The agent turned the credit card voucher toward me to sign.

“My card information isn’t on the ticket, is it?” I asked, just to be sure.

“Nope, just on the receipt,” he assured me passing me the thick booklet of transfers that Juan would need to use to get him to Oklahoma City along with my credit card and receipt.

I went outside to Juan.

“Use your \$65.00 for food,” I said to him handing him the thick packet. He took the ticket, looked me in the eye, smiled and shook my hand.

“Thank you, Padre”

“You’re welcome. God bless you,” I said turning back toward my car.

As I was pulling out, I waved to Juan, heavyset, sweaty and dirty, unshaven and unkempt with a garbage bag of his possessions slung over his shoulder. He was about to board the bus where he would have to stand until he reached West Palm Beach on his journey to Oklahoma City where he was going so he could pick tomatoes and make some money.

I felt some sadness for him. I also felt thankfulness for the work he does and some guilt, too. As I drove away from the Greyhound Bus Station I thought about the plight of migrant farm workers and how much we, we, exploit them. I thought about how much hostility and prejudice our society directs toward Juan and so many other people like him even as we continue to eat the food they pick for us, not giving them a second thought.

In our home, we usually have a barbecue on Labor Day. This year as I prepare to bite into a grilled hamburger topped with a juicy ripe tomato, I will be thinking of Juan and saying a prayer of thanksgiving for his labor and that of so many like him. I hope you will too.

Of course, Juan won't be aware of any of this. On Monday, while millions of Americans go to the mall to shop, he'll likely be in the fields of Oklahoma picking tomatoes. He'll keep doing that until it is time to move on to the next crop.

As we eat our hotdogs and hamburgers and tomatoes and watermelons or whatever it is that will be on our tables on Monday, let's stop for a moment and think about God's party and God's invitation and give thanks that it has been extended to us. Let's also be sure to give thanks for the Juans of the world who play such an important role in feeding us....Let's be more inviting to all people, no matter who they are and what their station in life, let's be intentional about striving for justice for those who are exploited and treated poorly...And last of all, let's ask better questions about who we think should be in what seat....God might just have different ideas....