

15th Sunday after Pentecost, August 28st, 2016
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Readings: Proverbs 25:6-7, Psalm 112, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14

I want to ask you to take a moment and think about one of your favorite fairy tales. Think of what happens between the lines “once upon a time” and “lived happily ever after”. Timeless, wise lessons are imparted to developing children’s minds and those reading them the stories, conveying moral, social and even political lessons through skillful narrative and interesting characters. Pinocchio was one of my favorites, and looking back I realize what I liked most about that story was the succinct and clear way in which I learned lessons about braveness, truthfulness, and selflessness. Today we heard a one sentence lesson from the book of Proverbs, a book with a literary style that is known for its clarity. It is called the book of Proverbs because each lesson is written in that proverbial literary style that is clean, clear, and concise. A genre that appeals to me in the same way that fairy tales still do!

The book of Proverbs is believed to contain some of the earliest pieces of wisdom literature in the Bible (circa 10th C BC), and believed to have been composed by King Solomon, one of the 48 prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the builder of the first temple of Jerusalem. The proverbs attributed to King Solomon typically address social etiquette and righteous conduct, a message intended for the young males who served the king and his family in the royal court.

Today’s reading from Luke’s gospel, albeit a less succinct story, is equally clear in its message about humility and hospitality as the Proverbs reading. Jesus in Luke’s gospel did what fairy tales do so well, Jesus taught a life lesson using a story. Our Lord had been invited to a dinner party and after watching the guests jockeying for the chair closest to the guest of honor, he taught them a lesson that I must have heard my grandmother paraphrase God knows how many times when I was growing up –a lesson about humility and hospitality to others.

Not unlike the young men in Solomon’s court, or the people at the dinner party, we too live in a hierarchical society. In the few years that I’ve lived in Northern Virginia I have heard many a story of junior staff people working for the government and military, being reprimanded for “driving outside their lane”, in other words, jockeying for a place at the table with suggestions that might be very wise and useful, but for reasons of hierarchical etiquette, inappropriately offered by the underling who shouldn’t be speaking while sitting at the head table. Sometimes these social norms can be double edge swords because humility and hospitality are critical regardless of one’s place in the org chart; and besides, not every person high up in the food chain has the solution to every problem and some underling at the far end

of the food chain might have a wise suggestion that can in fact change the world. In the case of our Lord Jesus Christ, well, he had a message for everyone in the food chain!

The gospel story today addresses the head honcho and his important guests. Jesus' lesson addressed unconditional hospitality and humility in a way that reminds us how God's hospitality can break hierarchical and social barriers. The reading from Hebrews has something to say about that too with a general teaching for the church that, like a good fairy tale, applied as much then as it does now. It is a message for the church to be a place made up of people that share what they have through "mutual love". Quoting that beautiful and oft repeated phrase regarding God's open table and radical hospitality, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it." Again, the scripture reminds us that we never know when the stranger among us might in fact be God's messenger wanting to bring us good news and new possibilities.

Tomorrow our children will be returning to school. We should all remember that first day of school in our life experiences, for some it is full of great expectation and fun while for others it is full of anxiety and trepidation. There will be new friends to make, new teachers to meet, new rules to follow, and everyone will be trying to figure out their place in the food chain, including teachers and staff. All the jockeying around takes place because we seek a place to feel welcomed, we seek security, we seek hospitality. The pearl of wisdom in today's text is to remain humble and open, because God is with us wherever we are; giving us security in those places that may be unfamiliar to us but familiar to God. God is in the lunchroom at every table with every kid, God is in the classroom where children and teachers might struggle. While some may want to scramble to the front of the room, others might be more comfortable in the middle of the pack, and yet others way back there out of sight – but God is in each of those places.

So regardless of where we sit at the table, or what place in line we hold, or what lane we are driving in, we must rest assured of the inmesurable love and protection of God with us. We must also remember what Jesus invited his friends to be a part of, a table that should be approached with humility, with an open heart and mind, with outstretched hands for all to feel welcome; a table where the food never runs out. Amen.