

***This sermon was preached by Seminarian Silke Force
on her last Sunday in our parish, August 19, 2012.***

BREAD AND HOSPITALITY

Pentecost 12 – Cycle B: John 6:51-58

Last week, the Rev. Dr. Tim Hegedus reminded us about the importance of bread in every culture, most especially that of the Middle East. It found a certain resonance with me; but then again, it may just be that I am somewhat more tuned in to references to the Middle East after my many long visits there.

One thing I learned very early on in my sojourn was the importance of hospitality. It is actually incumbent upon the residents of the Middle East that they extend the hand of hospitality for three days to any stranger who comes looking for refuge without asking why they need it.

Hospitality customs were a vital part of the culture of the ancient world and still are in many parts of the Middle East. The people followed these customs as formal, even sacred, codes of conduct.

Hospitality customs in the biblical world related to two distinct classes of people: the traveler and the resident alien. In most translations of the Bible, there is little attempt to try to separate the two. Even in the original Hebrew and Greek, different words are sometimes used interchangeably for the two groups. Either one is called a *stranger*, one who does not belong to a particular community or group. Other terms applied to either or both are: *foreigner*, *alien*, *sojourner*, *wayfarer*, or *gentile*. In Israel, the law protected the resident aliens, foreigners who had settled permanently in the land. They could not own land, but could participate in communal activities. Travellers, however, were extremely vulnerable. Only the force of the customs of hospitality protected them.

The environment of the desert and of the arid land in most of the Middle East is harsh. For a traveler, access to water and food was a matter of life and death. Most settlements were built near available water or wells. The traveler needed to have access to the water. Yet, it was also important for the settled community to have protection. As a result, strict codes of conduct developed to govern such encounters. These conventions of hospitality also applied equally to the desert dwellers who lived in tents as they followed the grazing herds. They were obligated to provide for travelers that stopped at their tents, and under these customs could expect some protection from hostile actions from the "stranger."

The host was obliged to provide the traveler with food, water, and shelter. In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham welcomed three such "strangers" into his tent. He eagerly ran to meet them and lavishly welcomed them. Abraham's words and actions, including bowing to the ground, seem exaggerated to us. However, this was typical of Oriental hospitality. He provided them with water to wash their dusty feet and a place to rest.

Often a servant washed the feet of the guest. This provided a needed and refreshing service. However, it also symbolized the acceptance of the stranger and the absence of any hostile intent by the host. Abraham's elaborate preparations for the meal indicate the importance of providing for the travelers. When they left, Abraham traveled with them a short distance "to start them on their way."

Luke recounts Jesus' visit in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon failed to greet Jesus and provide water to wash his feet. By this omission, he violated the most basic customs of Eastern hospitality. This was a profound insult and hinted at hostility to Jesus. Jesus used Simon's insult as an example of the failure to understand the nature of sin and forgiveness.

The traveler was expected to accept what the host offered. To refuse such hospitality was an insult that only an enemy would inflict. But it would be difficult not to find something on the table that was not to one's liking. There is not one variety of olives on the table, but three, and hummus and eggplant, some pita, pickles, and white cheese. There are two main courses, in case one might not be to the guest's taste, and fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, okra, onions, eggs. And of course, there was always bread on the table, just as there is here today. Bread is acceptable to even the strangest of strangers. Bread is something we all understand. There is good reason that Jesus chose the image of bread to represent his presence at our table.

On the other hand, a traveler would interpret a resident's failure to provide food and amenities as a hostile act. Travellers had few legal or political rights in the ancient world. They were largely at the mercy of the residents where they journeyed. By accepting travellers, especially in providing them food and sharing that food with them, the host also took the responsibility of protecting them. The story of Lot offers graphic evidence of the importance of protection. Lot offered his virgin daughters to an angry mob rather than betray the guests "who have come under the shelter of my roof." In another instance, an old man pleaded with the men of his town not to harm a traveling Levite because "this man has come into my house." Likewise, the traveler, by accepting the hospitality of the host, was responsible to honor the host and refrain from any hostile actions against the host or the host's household.

The sharing of food together was a token of friendship, a form of covenantal commitment. In the Koran as in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, the mistreatment of strangers is a sure way to incur divine wrath. One of the most despicable acts in the ancient world was to eat with people and then betray them. This entire "code" of hospitality in the Middle East was so strong that it evoked a warning: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." It is also this dimension of mutual commitment in the sharing of food that provides the Eucharist with one of its most dynamic meanings. Jesus offers himself as food to all and we have no right to bar anyone from sharing it with us.

Part of the goodness in hospitality is in receiving a person outside the community from whom one has no immediate expectation of reciprocity. The person you help may never be in a position to help you—he or she may even bring you harm. Still, hosts are obliged to extend themselves.

Jesus too offers himself without expectation of reciprocity. He does not ask us to do anything for him. He asks only that we extend his hospitality to others, to keep alive the foretaste of the coming reign of God.

It's interesting that the taste of the food our hosts offer us lingers a long time. I remember a recent host's wonderful pork souvlaki, and that becomes associated with him. I remember the succulent array of food offered at a welcome to our summer pastor last year. I remember it and therefore our host and our special guest fondly. At St. Stephen's Church in Kitchener, the ladies outdo each other in the soup suppers they offer during the Lenten season, and I associate certain tastes with certain people. That cheddar cheese soup with the lovely malt undertones that spoke of the beer that enriched the dish immediately conjures up the face of the cook for me.

I had a brilliant professor who discovered that he could help his students remember the most difficult concepts by treating us with food. His focus then was on religion shortly after the time of Christ. He would bake breads or cookies that were in some way associated with the concept he was trying to get us to understand. Sometimes he would tell us what the ingredients in the bread were and get us to figure out how they were linked to the concept. Sometimes he would have us guess the ingredients. It is amazing to me still how well we did in his exams. His methods justifiably earned him Canada's teacher of the year award.

Whether he was aware of it or not, he shared much of himself in those small meals, just as Pastor James does this morning in the communion bread that he has freshly baked for us. Jesus shares himself through James and we receive the gospel of forgiveness through both the baker and the bread.

The hospitality of the living and ever-living Jesus is a promise to all of us. It is a promise that all are welcome, not only here at the small table which offers us a foretaste, but also at the heavenly banquet.

And in Tim's words from last week: the Gospel of Christ is more food-related than we ever imagined. It's not surprising, then, that each week when we come together we gather around a table, the Lord's Table, where Jesus feeds us with forgiveness, mercy and grace. At this table God loves us generously and transforms us into people who love generously. May that be so in our lives and in God's church throughout the world.