

“Emily Post and Martha Stewart meet Jesus”

A Sermon preached by Canon Rick Cross

Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati

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At a sabbath dinner party, given by a prominent leader of the congregation, “... *Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor.*” Placing one’s own self-interest ahead of the needs or conditions of others, especially those in special or serious need, violates the norm of Christian humility. I remember a newcomer in a former parish who innocently sat in a long-time member’s pew, and was rather rudely told to find another seat. It reminds me of being at a concert where there has been a mix-up of seats, and the usher tries to unscramble the confusion, dealing with uncooperative patrons who resist moving to the rightful, yet poorer seats. Superficial social distinctions and identities can obscure the way Jesus teaches us to live. Cultural values and social habits are oftentimes turned upside down in God’s community.

As I was studying the Gospel for today, I had a fantasy about being in The Great American Ball Park for a Reds game. I dutifully and humbly took my cheap \$10. Right Field bleacher seat and squinted up over home plate, gazing at those glass-fronted luxury boxes, wondering just who was seated up there in the places of honor. All I could think about was Jesus’ parable, and I imagined a message being flashed across one of the big screens, telling me I was being called to one of the boxes. I slipped out my pocket New Testament and quickly turned to the fourteenth chapter of Luke. I grabbed the next usher passing by and asked him to read the story, hoping he would be convicted by scripture right there on the spot and follow the example from Holy Scripture, saying, “Friend, move up higher,” pointing to a luxury box seat. Instead he shook his head at me and muttered, “Bud, that Jesus guy was talking about weddings. He’d never make it running a major league ball park.”

“Emily Post and Martha Stewart meet Jesus.”

The Cathedral Hospitality Committee holds their annual organizational meeting later today, and it is more than happenstance that Jesus’ teaching this morning is about hospitality. However, Emily Post and Martha Stewart will both have to join us as students as the Master Host and teacher leads our class in “Principles of Christian Entertaining and Etiquette.”

First, I want to thank the many and long-standing members who so faithfully serve us all a delicious and varied menu of goodies fifty-two Sundays a year. What would Anglican worship be without a really good coffee hour? Most Sundays our hosts and hostesses go above and beyond the call of duty to whip up unique and surprising home-made treats. And much like the Altar and Flower Guilds who work behind the scenes to set a beautiful altar

each worship service, which can be seen as an extension of hospitality, we take them for granted. This is Labor Day Weekend. Let's honor them.

Christian hospitality is a ministry. It is about serving others. The prototype in ordained orders is the Diaconate. Deacons were first called and commissioned to wait on tables at Christian gatherings, so other leaders could be free to exercise their gifts like teaching and healing. Episcopal clergy are all ordained as Deacons first. Priesthood is an extension of that calling and we may need to be reminded from time to time that waiting on tables is a holy order. One of the five traditional characteristics of Christian communities is "Diaconia," which translated from the Greek means "to serve."

Emily Post and Martha Stewart would tutor us in how to entertain our familiar friends and family, social, political and business contacts. This congregation is full of people who excel at this, and I am occasionally the beneficiary of your marvelous hospitality. But Jesus has taken this skill or gift, which I believe it is, to another level.

Recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews must have been experiencing some difficulty with their Hospitality Committee. We can assume they were great at entertaining themselves, but the writer cautions them, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*" (Hebrews 13:1-8)

Every Christian community has a responsibility for welcoming newcomers. Our Membership Committee works hard to do this here. Times in the past when I have been searching for jobs, I learned that most congregations describe themselves as "warm and friendly." And they probably are to each other. But showing hospitality to **strangers** is a horse of another color. Many of us describe the Cathedral the same way, and much of the time I think it is true. But there are natural barriers to welcoming strangers and the Letter to the Hebrews is addressing this issue.

What do angels look like? This is the big question. Are they always white and gold? Do they always have halos? And what about wings? If angels are God's messengers, and God does not look on outward appearances, but at the heart, then we have to be very careful at making judgements about hospitality based on appearances. Strangers sometimes look strange. Sometimes their speech is strange... not exactly the Queen's English. Sometimes the way they act in church or the way they pray or worship is strange. Sometimes the way they interact at coffee hour is strange. Angels are like that.

A Benedictine motto is a wonderful reminder: "Treat everyone who enters as Christ." My comfort level or lack of comfort with strangers sometimes is based in fear — fear of the unknown. It is much harder to trust you if I do not know you. That is why getting to know

one another is so important. Getting to know strangers, is getting to know Christ better. In fact I would go so far as to say that one's personal knowledge of the living resurrected Christ will be deepened to the extent one is able to know and accept strangers.

I hope there will be some exciting new initiatives at the Cathedral as a result of the Vision statement that proclaims: *"We are an open, inclusive, diverse and welcoming Christian community."*

Can you just imagine Jesus' conversation with his host as he was leaving the dinner party that sabbath? This was a socially prominent Pharisee and the guest list was extensive. He had been a guest at many dinner parties given by other socialites, and he had decided to return all of these favors by inviting all of these hosts in one fell swoop. He was greeting his guests at the door as they began to leave. Jesus pulled him aside into an alcove of the large room and, out of earshot of other guests, thanked him for the meal and in a kind but firm voice gave him the new hospitality protocol.

"Thank you so much for inviting me to this lovely dinner. I have enjoyed talking with all your guests. But I have a suggestion for you. The next time 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."

The host was taken by surprise and didn't know what to say. He had a puzzled look on his face and a blank stare as Jesus slipped quietly out the door. What did all this mean? What does it mean? Certainly it is not wrong to entertain friends and family. However, to continue to live our social lives with careless disregard for those outside our normal circles of interaction, is missing the mark of God's kingdom.

We continue to reaffirm our Baptismal vows to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. And our neighborhood is now the world. We must proactively seek ways to break down walls that separate us from other human beings.

As we give a scrumptious banquet around the Eucharistic table each week, we need to invite more poor, crippled, lame, blind, and I would add disadvantaged and handicapped guests. Why does Jesus push us in that direction? What is it about economic poverty and being handicapped that is so significant? And why did Jesus spend so much of his time with these broken outcasts of society? Some theologians describe a Christian mandate as a "preferential option for the poor."

Poor people are not inherently more righteous than rich people. It's something to do with the nature of the exchange that takes place between people. And it may have to do with motive, or maintaining a calculated balance of power. A few years ago someone asked me a good question: "Do you have any friends who are poor?" And then a second: "Do you really know anyone who is poor?" I confess my list was pretty short. I pass the questions on to you, and not to make you feel guilty, but rather to offer you an opportunity to deepen your spiritual life, as Jesus was doing to his host — offering connections to angels.

Last Tuesday evening, as they have in varying numbers for over a year now, almost 180 hungry people from downtown Cincinnati came to the Cathedral as guests of the 5000 Club. That is about as many people as are here today. I like to think that some of the same hospitality and feeding goes on whether it is Sunday or Tuesday, whether it is upstairs or downstairs. We gather around our Communion table, set with linen, silver and fresh flowers, to be fed a taste of the banquet being prepared for us in the kingdom, and we have been asked to remember Jesus as we are guests at his table.

The Tuesday neighborhood supper is a literal banquet for most of our guests who are poor in spirit and resources, crippled emotionally, lame socially, and blind to hope and happiness. Their tables are set with table cloths, china, and fresh flowers. That one good meal is really only a token of the long-term sustenance each of them needs and seeks. Each of our guests wears a name tag, and is personally greeted by volunteers, who have gotten to know many of the regulars.

Stranger by stranger, person by person, relationship by relationship, one week at a time, our lives are being changed by the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit. The thirty-something regular volunteers have been able to give assistance to a few of the guests such as gloves and coats in cold weather and clean socks in the summer. Like the food, all gifts are given without condition, and there is no expectation of being paid back. Appreciation from our guests is overwhelming. Most of them have nothing. Their gift to us is the story of their lives. To be entrusted with some of these stories is both frightening and inspiring. The pain, suffering, brokenness, and raw human need, jerks me out of my comfortable, safe, healthy middle-class stupor for an interlude. But these connections are pearls of great price, and I have no question that there are angels on our guest list each week.

Usually several guests ask me to pray with them for personal needs such as loss of a loved one, strength in the struggle to overcome addictions, an upcoming job interview, a decent place to live, the ability to control anger, or for forgiveness. They are not ashamed or hesitant to ask for prayer right in the midst of the public supper. Several usually read their Bibles while they are waiting, and it is not uncommon for me to get questions about some interpretation of one scripture or another. Many ask what kind of church this is and what

time the services are and if they would be welcomed.

It is difficult to get to know the larger numbers we are now serving, and there are openings for some of you, perhaps, to attend the suppers and help out. Originally we had planned to eat with our guests, but we need more help to make that happen. Ideally, I would like to see one host or hostess at each table to listen to our guests and offer them the hospitality they deserve.

As we continue to broaden the hospitality which Jesus has taught us, be assured your name is on the Tuesday night neighborhood guest list. Consider this your invitation.

Please join with me in a closing prayer For the Human Family found on page 815 in the Book of Common Prayer.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.