

15 Pentecost Yr C, 28/08/2016
Heb 13:1-3 & Lk 14:1, 7-14
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Hospitality, remembering prisoners, and the tortured, and table etiquette”

Hospitality. Welcoming strangers, remembering prisoners, remembering the tortured, learning proper banquet table manners by sitting in the lowest place, and by inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to the banquet feast. In both our passage from Hebrews and today’s gospel, we are instructed in the practice of hospitality. In biblical times, hospitality was very important; so important that in some circumstances it was a matter of life and death. Offering hospitality could actually save a person’s life—especially if they were a travelling stranger and ran out of food and had nothing to drink. Without food or drink while travelling in a hot climate could mean death—so offering such people hospitality could save their lives.

Our passage from Hebrews and today’s gospel raises the question to each one of us: Do we offer hospitality to others? If so, whom do we choose to offer hospitality to, our family, friends and neighbours; people we know, or people we don’t know and who most likely cannot offer us hospitality in return?

In the heartwarming and humorous movie, “The Straight Story,” based on the true story of Alvin Straight, the theme welcoming strangers occurs several times.

While travelling on his 1966 John Deere garden and lawn tractor, towing a trailer, and camping under the stars to see his brother Lyle; Alvin welcomes and listens to, feeds and counsels a runaway, pregnant teenaged girl. He is welcomed warmly by a kind man who invites him to stay in his yard, while his tractor is being repaired. Another man driving a tractor, stops to talk with Alvin and shows him where his brother Lyle lives. A pastor offers Alvin a listening ear and some food and drink on his way to Lyle’s place.

In all of these scenes, we are reminded of the words of our Hebrews passage: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that

some have entertained angels without knowing it.” These examples of hospitality shown to Alvin Straight also remind us of our gospel where Jesus teaches us to invite people to a banquet who most likely are strangers and cannot pay you back—people like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

In our Hebrews passage, the writer goes on to say that offering hospitality to strangers also may involve remembering prisoners as though you were in prison with them; and remembering the tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured. That reminds me of another story.

Martha Kuwee Kumsa and her three young children arrived in Canada in 1991 as refugees. She had spent 10 years in an Ethiopian prison because of her work as a journalist and her support for the rights of the Oromo people. Martha knows what it means to be broken in body and spirit. She was brutally tortured. Many of her fellow prisoners were killed before her eyes or vanished without a trace or explanation. While imprisoned, Martha received letters which encouraged her to “hope against despair.” She taught herself French, and then taught it as well as biology, geography and math to prisoners and to the sons and daughters of prison administrators.

The resilience and energy which allowed Martha to survive in prison, allowed her to survive in Canada. Today she is a published writer and poet who speaks around the world on the topic of human rights and freedom of expression. She has received multiple awards for her work and is an active member of human rights organisations including PEN Canada and Amnesty International. After arriving in Canada she returned to school and finished a PhD in social work. She is now a full professor teaching at Wilfred Laurier University.

Martha’s profile as a journalist and attention from the outside world helped to keep her alive, but not everyone is so lucky. Prison inspections would have provided some measure of protection to Martha and the other detainees. She calls on Canada to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against

Torture. All prisoners have the right to be safe and free from torture and mistreatment.¹ Martha and others like her are alive and living in a safe place thanks to people and organisations like Amnesty International, who remember and advocate for prisoners and those who are tortured. As Christians we too are called on to remember prisoners and those who are tortured and do what we can to free them and care for them by offering hospitality to them.

The theme of offering hospitality is also important in today's gospel, where Jesus instructs us not to invite our family, friends, neighbours or the rich and famous who can return hospitality to us. No. Rather, Jesus tells us that if we are having a party and preparing a banquet to go and invite those who most likely cannot repay us, folks like: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. That reminds me of the following true story of Mother Teresa.

Perhaps there has been no more worthy recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize than Mother Teresa of India. This nun, originally from Europe, but having spent her most notable years of work among the poor of India, has now become a world figure. Her efforts might be described most briefly as helping the living stay alive, and helping the dying, die with some dignity. While her work [was] not front page news the world [did take] note and the Nobel Committee voted her their peace prize.

It is their custom to hold a large formal dinner for the prize winners and many dignitaries. When the good Mother Superior learned such a dinner would cost around \$10,000, she protested: "Do you know how many poor people in India that money would feed?" The committee recognized such a dinner for her would be entirely opposed to the reasons for which they granted her the prize. The dinner was cancelled and the money donated to her work in India.²

As Jesus said: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Amen.

1 Cited from Amnesty International's website, at:

<<http://www.amnesty.ca/torture-survivors-photo-exhibit>>.

2 *Emphasis* online, at: <sermonsuite.com>.