

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17 – Year C
Sirach 10:12-18, Psalm 112, Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14
Sermon 9-1-2019 – Labor Day

Today we had a bonus, an additional collect at the beginning of the service, the collect for Labor Day. Collects are prayers to collect and focus our thoughts as we begin worship. It's the time when we are called together, to let go of thoughts of what chores we have to do, what there might be for lunch, or if we remembered to turn off the stove or the headlights on the car. It's the prayer whose purpose is to get us all on the same page. To be collected and focused are important because we worship together, in community.

I was particularly struck by the first line of the Labor Day collect. "Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affect, for good or ill, all other lives:" There is much to be thought about in that short line. God, and no other has linked our lives one with another. Human beings are created to be connected with each other. It is not good, not life-giving for humans to be in isolation. Isolation is different than solitude and silence, both of which humans need to be healthy. Isolation is being cut off from the community, not having the choice to engage with others. Solitude is intentionally going apart for a time to listen for the voice of God, to rest, to allow our energy to be restored. People need varying amounts of restorative solitude and silence. No one is benefited by isolation.

We are part of the web of the universe created by God. "Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another." A pretty awe-inspiring thought for eleven words. If that were not enough, the collect goes on to describe what this God given linkage means. **All** that we do, affects for good or ill **all** other lives. We are connected in such a way that whatever we do has an impact on everyone else in some way. Our impact can be for good or ill, but rarely is what we do neutral in terms of the power we exercise. To circle back to the beginning of this, the power we have was given to us by God at creation. We are accountable to God for our use of that power, for good or ill.

When I think of the connection of all that is the web of the universe, I also think of "we" who are gathered here today and those who are part of the "we" that is St. Augustine, who are not here today. I am reminded that we together with Christians everywhere are a part of the Body of Christ. St. Paul said is well when he described to the Corinthian Church the necessity of all parts of the body. "We who are many are one body."

Labor Day is traditionally a day of speeches, picnics and the informal beginning of election campaigns. By most accounts, the country is divided in an unhealthy way. Many expect the next many months to be brutal and pitiless no matter where one stands politically. Many would and will simply disengage and wait for the whole thing to be over.

We, as Christians cannot afford to disengage and hide for the next several months. We cannot do so because in the words of the collect our actions have meaning for good or ill in the lives of the rest of the community, whether that community is our families, our nation, our

church or the world. There is expected to be much conflict in the days ahead and human beings are not noted for dealing well with conflict. And so we come to the Gospel for this morning.

“On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a Pharisee to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.” Jesus was not often invited to the house of leaders of the Pharisees or other Jewish leaders. But somehow, this one leader was intrigued by Jesus and invited him to a special dinner party a wedding banquet. Having noticed that the guests each strove for the most honorable place at the table, Jesus does what Jesus does best, he tells a story, in this case a parable.

Parables were and are vehicles of instruction because they invite us to put ourselves into the place of the characters and vicariously be a part of the situation described. They deal with practical matters that we have all encountered. Who hasn't known someone who was pushy; striving for recognition and status. Might we even think of a time when we were tempted to be that person? Parables, when well constructed, trigger important questions. What are the feelings we recognize in ourselves as we hear of someone asked to take a lower seat? What does it mean to be humbled, what does it mean to be exalted? Parables are larger than the story that holds them. They can apply to a wide variety of situations in our lives.

Parables can be a bit devious as well. The meaning may seem apparent on the surface, but a parable is designed to turn the world upside down and cause us to look at things from a different perspective. Imagine yourself the person who takes a high seat and is asked to move lower. Embarrassing? Humiliating? Mortifying? Not necessarily so. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Parables turn the world upside down so that we may understand things differently. Robert Capon, in discussing this parable makes the observation that people “...hear ‘humble yourself’ and they immediately think of the bitter pill of moral effort.” Capon goes on to say that this parable is about the liberating joy of letting go. The freedom of no longer having to strive for a higher position in the world. Or, in terms of the upcoming political season, no longer having conversations about the country and the world and having to be “right”, no longer feeling compelled to convince someone else of the truth of your position. This is the freedom to be able to say candidly, “I don't agree, but tell me more”. Or, ‘Here is why I think what I think, can you tell me why you think differently?’ The parable in today's Gospel is about freedom, liberation, letting go so that we can see other points of view, while still being secure in the point of view we hold. This will truly turn the conversation and the world upside down. It will without doubt recognize the link between our life and the life of the one we encounter.

If we live in this way, not only in the political season but in all of our relationships, we can be a force for good and not ill. It is hard work, and it takes courage to let go of what we believe in our hearts is “right”, courage to listen, when the other person does not behave in the same way. And we will meet many who do not behave in the same way. But, a start must be made somewhere and with someone. To paraphrase the song, let there be connection and let it begin with me. Let there be the freedom to listen and hear and let it begin with me.

Parker Palmer has written a book entitled "Healing the Heart of Democracy" which I have just begun to read. He is talking about how we return to a time when we can talk about our common civic life and do so with grace and respect. Like the parables, however, much of what he says can be applied fruitfully to other situations in our lives, to disagreement and conflict in families, neighborhoods, schools and even our church communities. For these are the connections which link us together. These are the relationships in which any action taken affects for good or ill all others.

To quote Palmer: "If you hold your knowledge of self and world wholeheartedly, your heart will at times get broken by loss, failure, defeat, betrayal, or death. What happens next in you and the world around you depends on how your heart breaks. If it breaks apart into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement. If it breaks open into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be new life."

In our life together, what we think, what we feel, what we do matters. In our life together what another thinks, and feels, what another does matters. Therein lies the core of conflict. When what we think, feel, do does not correspond with another's viewpoint or action, when there are differences conflict arises. Conflict is not bad, rather it is inevitable when human lives are linked together. What happens next is what decides whether the conflict will be constructive or will destroy the relationship. In the midst of conflict are our hearts broken apart or broken open?

Ignoring our differences, or refusing to engage diminishes the potential for the new life Palmer speaks of. If we can hold our differences with respect, patience, openness, and hope then reconciliation can result and new life is possible. Reconciliation does not mean to agree or to wipe out honest disagreement. What it can mean is that we have room to be whoever we are and we allow others to have that same room to be whoever they are, whether we reach agreement with the other or not. Reconciliation does not require that others agree. What it does is enable all to be in the community and to tell their truth acknowledging that other people may see things in a different light. It is about being community not about conforming.

Columnist Molly Ivins has said of democracy, "The thing about democracy, beloveds, is that it is not neat, orderly, or quiet. It requires a certain relish for confusion." The same can be said about any area of our lives where we engage with another person or group over an issue. When we feel strongly it takes courage to engage with someone who also feels strongly but in a different way. It is not neat, orderly or quiet, and there will be confusion but also the potential for new life. Our lives are part of the web of the universe, linked by God to one another. We will have conflict for good or ill. To use disagreement for good, we must approach it in the confidence and trust that everyone can come to a place where the bond of community is stronger than any disagreement.