

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
World Communion Sunday- October 7, 2007

Scripture lessons: Hebrews 13:1-6 & Luke 14:7-14

IN THE COMPANY OF BEGGARS

Imagine you're on the road. You're a long way from home when your car breaks down. It's way beyond your ability to fix. You're out in the middle of nowhere, many miles from any exit, and you're like me, which means you're a technological dinosaur who still has no cell phone. You wish you had one now, but you don't, so what will you do?

What else can you do except wait to see if some random stranger will be good enough to stop and help you. How does it feel to be in that position? Is it vaguely humiliating, just plain scary, or both?

In Tennessee Williams' play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois says that she's always depended on "the kindness of strangers". That's the situation you're in now- completely dependent on the kindness of whoever comes along. Will it be a good stranger or a bad stranger?

Even if it is a good stranger willing to help you, how does it feel to be utterly dependent on them? You're at their mercy for, in effect, you're begging. Think of how you feel when a stranger on the street panhandles from you. It's uncomfortable, but this seems even worse. Are there any of us who ever wants to be the beggar, to be the stranger who has to ask directly for the kindness we urgently need?

Today's first Scripture from the letter to the Hebrews, tells us to "show hospitality to strangers." Hebrews doesn't usually give us ethical instruction so it's striking that when it does, it calls us first to hospitality. It urges us to be open and generous, specifically with strangers and, in the context of the early church, particularly to those on the road. In the first centuries after Jesus, Christian faith spread like wildfire through the Mediterranean world. Many Christians were on the move from place to place in a time before inns, motels, and other such accommodations were commonplace. Hospitality was a practical need within the life of the wider church. It was, more importantly, a spiritual necessity for any follower of Jesus.

In the early church, hospitality meant literally opening your home to strangers to let them stay with you. We're much more squeamish about that today. Do any of us regularly keep open a "hospitality room" in our home to which we're always ready to invite a needy stranger? I know I don't. It's a form of hospitality I'm neither giving nor courageous enough to provide.

Yet for me it probably would be even more difficult to be that stranger in need, to be someone who hadn't secured my own living space, but instead relied directly on someone else to provide it. Being hospitable to strangers is challenging. But being the stranger who blatantly needs and depends on the generosity of others might be even tougher.

All of which leads to a big question for today- how did Jesus and his disciples get what they needed? To move right to the point- where did they get their food? How did they make sure they had a roof over their heads?

The gospels never talk about any work that Jesus does for which he gets paid. It long has been assumed, and rightly so, that as the son of a 1st century Jewish carpenter he probably learned his father's trade and practiced it as a young man. He'd have been paid for his carpentry work, but once his public ministry begins he lives simply as a wandering preacher, teacher, and healer.

The gospels portray his disciples as men who, prior to Jesus' call, also worked for pay. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, for example, were fishermen and Matthew was a tax collector. But once they start following Jesus, they, too, are wanderers. The gospels depict Jesus and his band as foraging for food and sleeping beneath the stars. More often, like Blanche DuBois, they rely heavily on "the kindness of strangers".

Today's second Scripture gives an example as Jesus tells and elaborates on a wedding banquet parable. He does this with a group of guests, of whom he's one, at a dinner party being hosted by a leading Pharisee. The gospels tell many other stories in which Jesus and his disciples gladly receive and count on the hospitality of others.

When Jesus teaches about the importance of helping those in need, of giving a cup of cold water to the thirsty, of giving bread to children instead of stones, he's not talking about providing for intangible, spiritual needs. He's talking about raw, daily physical needs that he himself has and that he relies directly on other people to meet. This deliberate way of his life shows that he's neither afraid nor ashamed of having to depend so obviously on other people to provide for him day after day. He doesn't mind begging.

This is *very* different from the kind of life we like to think of as ours. For us, the thought of begging is bad. We see it as a sign of either personal or social laziness, irresponsibility, or ineptitude. To us, if a person or a society gets his, her, or its act together, no one ends up begging. That's our ideal because we love the thought of being *independent*.

We aspire to it perhaps above all else. We relish the ability to look out for and take care of ourselves. For us, a key mark of a young person's maturity is their ability to live "on their own". As we get older, many of us fervently desire that we'll never end up dependent on our children. As our parents get older many of us fervently desire that they'll never end up dependent on us. All of us want to be able to look out for and take care of ourselves.

Yet with his way of life, Jesus actively cultivates a sense of *dependence* on others, for himself, for his disciples, and for everyone he's trying to teach. He wants us to realize that at bottom all of us are, in fact, beggars. In truth, every one of us depends deeply on many others, no matter how much we might try to cover this over or fancy ourselves as self-sufficient.

It doesn't take much thought to realize it. Reflect for only a moment on how much we truly depend on so much that God has given us in nature and in history. It's a bounty that comes to us personally through all those who took and take care of us as infants and children, through those who've taught and teach us so much that we don't know on our own, through those who help us make a home out of the household we live in, through those who join us in the work that sustains our common world so that any of us have food on our tables or roofs over our heads, through those who are with us as members and citizens in our various religious, cultural, social, economic, political, and global settings. There's not a single one of us who ever comes anywhere close to going it alone or making it on our own. We all live only through a profound *dependence* on many, many others. We're all beggars.

It's a truth that often makes me squirm. Face-to-face with beggars, I can't avoid their claim on me. I have to look at them, to acknowledge them as fellow human beings, as sisters and brothers in God's family who have needs just like mine, needs that I can help to meet. I feel the responsibility of that and I squirm.

Face-to-face with my own dependence on others, I'm also uncomfortable. It's hard to admit that I'm at their mercy, to know that they can say "No" to me. Picture yourself asking someone directly for something you really need, something they can give you, something that if they don't give you will leave you in a bad way. It's a situation you'd much rather avoid.

But, then again, what if they say "Yes"? That can be just as or maybe even *more* uncomfortable because now you feel straight on how much you *are* indebted to them, how much you *do* depend on them. Confronted with others' dependence on me or mine on them, I squirm because I can't pretend anymore that I'm *independent* or self-sufficient. I can't get around the fact that all of us live only through a vast web of mutual *dependence* that God has made.

The Beatles once sang, "I get by with a little help from my friends." With his beggar way of life, Jesus puts it more sharply. He says, "All of us get by only with *tons* of help from our friends and from lots of strangers, too."

I remember a buddy who'd gone through a long stretch of serious illness. He'd fully recovered and was very grateful for it. But he was also thankful that through his illness he finally had come

to see much more clearly how dependent he was on other people- on his family, his friends, and the many strangers who cared for him in his medical treatment. He said he'd always imagined himself as independent, self-sufficient, and very much on his own- thank you. But now he knew what a proud and laughable illusion that was. He was humbled and determined to be much more generous.

Many of you know that I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for a long time. It's a place where homeless people are numerous and often highly visible. The ideal is that there should be a home for everyone, but until that time there's the continuing struggle over whether something else should be done to make the homeless less visible.

When I lived there, they occasionally would be swept from the public places where they gathered. Restrictions would be stiffened on where and how they could panhandle. It was miserable for them. For us who had homes it was a dilemma. You'd head into a store to buy something. A homeless person on the street would ask you for money. Unless you completely deadened your conscience, you couldn't help but wonder about your own resources. You couldn't help but wonder about how you spend your money and whether you needed to do so less selfishly. You couldn't help but wonder about why you have as much as you do, while that person on the street, face-to-face with you, has so little.

I remember a clergy colleague speaking of a man in a congregation he once served who came and told him, "Preacher, . . . if anybody ever comes to this church and asks for money for food, you give it to them and let me know. I'll pay the church back. I was hungry once and that's the worst situation in the world. I swore to God if I ever got my feet back on the ground and made any money I'd do whatever I could to make sure nobody in this town ever went hungry."

Maybe that's what it takes. Maybe at some point in our lives we, literally, have to be beggars, face down in a situation where we *absolutely* can't pretend anymore to make it on our own. Maybe that's what finally helps us feel in our bones the connection we have to each other, the responsibility that's ours to be with and care for one another as sisters and brothers who all have the same needs.

Jesus kept that fact before him and his disciples in the way they lived day by day. He keeps it before us now in the meal that he serves. He calls us to come to his table with hands that are *empty*.

He knows we're all able and accomplished. He knows we all have our achievements and attainments, things for which we've worked hard and feel we've earned, things we're tempted to cling to as emblems of our personal worth. Yet to him we come empty.

With Jesus, we let loose of all our accomplishments and things. With him, we remember instead our constant need- our need for God and the gifts God gives. Our need unites us with everyone everywhere. It bonds us with all of God's children who, like us, are beggars, who, like us, are empty, hungry, and poor, who, like us, depend completely on God.

At his table, Jesus provides for our need. He puts the bread of heaven in our hands. He offers us the cup of God's own life. He nourishes us with food and drink for life in God's kingdom. He cares for each of us as God's beloved and sends us forth to take care of each other. With him, we remember that we're all a company of beggars, each of us in need of the God who loves us so. Amen.