

Acts 11: 1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21: 1-6
St. John 13: 31-35

Easter IV 2022.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

St. John 13: 35

Wheaton College is a large American inter-denominational theological college. Central to the life of the college is Edman Chapel – where the students worship. “Edman Chapel” is named after a well-known and much-loved faculty member, who was known for the outstanding preaching which he offered in that chapel...

It happened that one day, after preaching a marvellous sermon, the Rev. Edman went back to his chair near the pulpit – and a moment later, slumped over, dead!... He had died instantly, and everyone agreed that the Rev. Edman had died in the perfect place for him – in a place of worship, just after he had proclaimed God’s Word through his message... In fact, people were so moved by the timing of his death, they named the chapel after him – and so one can visit the Edman Chapel at Wheaton College today...

A somewhat unfortunate aspect of the Rev. Edman’s death is less well known: ...At that time, students would often bring their knapsacks filled with textbooks and binders with them, and would leave them on the pews next to wherever they were sitting. Apparently, the Rev. Edman thought that the presence of knapsacks made the chapel look shabby and cluttered. After preaching his final rousing sermon, he was heard nearby to complain under his breath about those messy students and their knapsacks, as he made his way back to his seat. It was right after *this* that the Rev. Edman keeled over, dead...

Today is the third sermon in a sermon series on the subject of “discipleship...” The aim of the Rev. Marie and me is to help equip us, the parishioners of St. Brice’s, to develop practical habits to help you and me become better-equipped disciples of Jesus Christ... Two weeks ago the sermon was about “money.” Last week the sermon was about “prayer.” Today’s sermon is about “hospitality...” “Hospitality...”

We notice that, because a whole sermon in the series is focused on hospitality, the Rev. Marie and I believe strongly that exercising the biblical gift of hospitality is a core discipline in the life of every Christian – in our households; and in the local parish...

What *is* this often-overlooked gift of hospitality? Our behaviour – good, and bad -- flows out from the attitudes of our hearts... The Lord Jesus was very clear about this. Good attitudes lead to good behaviour. In contrast, selfish attitudes lead to bad behaviour... Mark 7: 20: “What comes out of a person is what defiles a person. For out of the heart come [sin]...”

Positively, hospitality is being oriented toward people – especially people different from ourselves – to love them, to make them comfortable, and to draw them into a relationship with us (and hopefully, a relationship with our divine Friend, Jesus Christ)...

Today's first reading is about Peter being drawn into a wider relationship of the gospel – not only with Jews, but with *Gentiles* – as Cornelius extends a welcome – hospitality – to Peter in his home. Today in John, we are reminded of the new commandment of the Lord Jesus: That we are to love one another...

I don't doubt that the Rev. Edman was an outstanding preacher. But whatever gifts he did possess, it seems that the Rev. Edman failed in exercising the gift of hospitality... Instead of seeing the students as fellow sheep who need to be loved, welcomed and encouraged, the presence of knapsacks was, for him, an offense to the decorum of a place of worship. Apparently, he held the value of tidiness in high esteem. What was to him an unseemly sight of knapsacks made him judgmental of others, and led to distance and disdain, rather than drawing people *into* love with us, and love with Christ... Do we see how this works? Sometimes we understand the gift of hospitality by noticing its absence...

In the words of the Christian songwriter Michael Card, addressing the Lord, sings these words: "Could it be you make your presence known so often by your absence?..."
<https://youtu.be/LuQX0NXFZAM> [Start at 2:52; end at 3:30]. Sometimes hospitality is noticed most by its absence...

How much do we *love* people – especially, people different from ourselves?... When we admit our petty sins and rebellions against our Holy God, and how much he loves *us*, in spite of ourselves – let's see how we need to be willing to love others, and to see them with the tender eyes of Christ...

How is hospitality lived out in practice?... Let's consider how we are open to encountering others... Sometimes Jesus taught in the Temple (Luke 20: 1) or in the synagogue (6: 6) or in the open country (8: 1), but it's astonishing how many times the Lord shared his life in the context of *hospitality* – of having a meal with his friends (10: 38) or tax collectors (19: 5) or Pharisees (14: 1)?... Luke's gospel record especially shows the Lord Jesus eating and drinking time and again. Evidently respectful of their diet and food habits, yet while eating heartily and drinking wine among them, Jesus Christ, full of life and love, taught and lived the kingdom among his friends and some rather dubious acquaintances...

Look how many times the Lord Jesus ate *after* his resurrection: He appeared to the apostles twice for Sunday night dinner, he ate with Cleopas and his friend; he enjoyed a hearty breakfast with the apostles. The local McDonalds restaurant had apparently run out of fishwiches, so the Lord made do...

Let's consider: Can we name our neighbours 3 doors down on both sides, and across the street?... Have we begun praying for them by name?... If they come to our local parish, that's a bonus. But we're called to love them, even if they will never go to Church or profess a faith in Christ.

If a neighbour begins to attend another local church, that's just fine. We aren't just trying to build up Anglicans – we want *all people* to respond to God's amazing love and mercy. Part of that package is to build up all church communities as a whole – even those we don't attend...

I'm inviting you to love people around your home – to pray for them, and to reach out somehow in conversation and hospitality in ways which feel natural to you...

Not only are we called to be hospitable in our homes and neighbourhoods and places of work. Our local churches are to be places of hospitality. The author of Hebrews is addressing an entire congregation when he writes, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it (13: 1-2)...”

Please don't just greet our *friends* when we come in St. Brice's front door. We make eye contact with others; we sincerely ask how they are doing; we take time to listen... We try very hard at St. Brice's to make it easier for people to be able to follow along in worship – but it can be scary to come to a new place of worship for the first time!... Ask a visitor if one can sit nearby; of course (choose another pew if someone is sitting where you're used to sitting); discreetly show them the hymn book if they're trying to find a musical piece in the Bible; smile!... Here of all places is a place of safety, love and hospitality for everyone... We need to be especially attentive to people we don't know, or don't know well. In the words of a sidesperson manual for another parish, we are to be “warm but not effusive...”

Our hospitality doesn't end at the conclusion of the service. I want to encourage us to offer a regular coffee hour on Sunday mornings – not because we might need caffeine, but because of what it shows about our *care* for one another. Hospitality after worship doesn't only benefit ourselves – it shows love for others... If we're having coffee or lunch, please seek out someone we don't know well (especially if they are sitting alone). Or, invite someone alone to join our group...

St. Peter encourages the Church, writing, “Above all, hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another” (4: 8-10)...

One piece of being a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ – is to love other people deeply, and to put this into practice in the gift of hospitality, in our homes and in our parish churches. As we have been loved so much (although we didn't earn or deserve the depth of God's love), we are to love others, and to build his kingdom. Let's practice robust hospitality. Amen!