
Wise Words for the Road

Sermons on

Radical Welcome





“It’s a River, Not a Pie”

The Reverend Bonnie Perry, Rector
All Saints Episcopal Church, Chicago, Illinois
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 15:11–32

*Gracious God,
break open our hearts
so that we may know
the expansiveness of your love;
in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.*

Good morning! *It’s a river—not a pie.* It’s a river—not a pie. I invite you to remember that.

Did you zone out when I started reading this morning’s gospel? Heaven knows if I hadn’t been reading it—I’m sure my mind would have gone somewhere for a while. It’s not like we don’t know how this particular story ends. The Prodigal Son—“Oh yeah.” The story of the Prodigal Son is to Christianity what the Yankees are to the World Series. “Ohhmmph—them again.”

Yet, this story is the essence of Christianity. Not the Christianity that some would have us believe. It’s not the narrow, moralistic, judgmental, provincial ideology that some purport it to be. It’s not the constitutional-amending, gay marriage-banning, if-you-love-another-adult-that-somehow-wrecks-who-I-love theology that some claim it to be.

The scriptural reality is that Christianity is first and foremost not about keeping people out, it’s not about sending people away, it’s not about saying, “You can’t play.” Christianity in its finest form is an open door and a warm hearth. It is a gracious host meeting us at the door and saying, “I’ve waited so long to see you. I am so happy you’re here. You know, I was hoping you’d stop by.”

Even though we know the Prodigal Son story, let’s just list out the basic facts so that they’re fresh in our minds:

1. Younger Son blows off family responsibilities by rudely asking for his inheritance before his father is dead and skips town. Promising, in words each of us has probably, in one form or another, uttered under our breath, “That’s it! I’m blowing this clam-bake and never coming back.”
2. Younger Son commits some very stimulating sins.

-
3. Younger Son wakes up one morning, his head nestled next to a pig's tail, a hangover permanently etched in his brain.
 4. Younger Son, through the fog, remembers his life before all the fun, recalls that at least then he had food and his best friends weren't pink with hooves.
 5. Blown-off Father walks down to the end of his driveway every day, scanning the horizon for his lost one, praying for his return.
 6. One day Blown-off Father's prayers are answered. The lost one returns. Before the sinning son can even say how sorry he is, Dad has the whole house in an uproar getting a mid-morning, mid-week party all put together.
 7. The Blown-off Father is now the Dad overflowing with emotion, because all he knows is that his son has come home. His son is alive. He smells a bit, looks a bit haggard around the edge. But he's kicking, breathing, and he's alive.
 8. Which of course brings us straight and unavoidably to the Big Brother: that overworked, fragile man; a man with whom I deeply identify. A man who knows right from wrong, good from bad, and most especially work from play. A man who is the good son. He comes back from the fields and what does he smell? Barbeque—tasty-savory-tangy beef barbeque—wafting through the air. Why is this? he asks. Your brother has come back. He's come back and they killed the fatted calf? Your dad is overjoyed. But my brother is scum. Your dad loves him. A party? What has Dad ever done for me? He gets the calf? And I get calluses.

Here's a man who in his very sinews and bones believes that there is a limit to his father's love, that his father only has a limited amount of love. That somehow whatever the "loser" son gets will vastly diminish what, he, the deserving son will receive. "If you love him this much—and give him all these things—what in Heaven's name will be left for me?"

And I know, I *know* how the older brother feels. (I'm an oldest sister—believe me, it only makes the condition worse.) Have you ever had that experience? The experience of slowly realizing that you are quietly and not so subtly becoming very annoyed and maybe even angry that someone else who has screwed up big-time has just been forgiven. Forgiven and offered another chance—or in this case, forgiven and then seemingly granted a party and a promotion.

Have you ever wondered, Now why am I busting my rear end, when there are others who seem just to coast along on other people's graciousness? How is this fair? How fair is it?

Two thoughts. The first: It's not fair. And we might do well to get down on our knees and say, "Thank you Jesus." It's not fair, and that's okay because we are constitutionally incapable of always being the big brother. I may identify with him. But that's only because it's easier for me to feel righteous than to remember all of the

times that I, like the younger brother, have been in desperate need of unmerited, completely unwarranted forgiveness. It's not fair. And that's good news.

My second thought: *It's a river, not a pie!* God's love for us is not a 9-inch, deep-dish strawberry-rhubarb pie—as delectable as that might be. God's love for us is a raging, roaring, rainforest-fed, class-five river of grace. It is an ever-flowing stream of abundant love.

God's love for us is not limited. God's love is not finite. It is not a pie that is whacked up and given out parsimoniously to the deserving. God's love, God's welcome, God's grace is distributed recklessly, washing over all in its path. God's love is a river—not a pie.

That was good news for the Prodigal Son. And it's even better news for us. Amen.



“Welcome: Close, Personal, Specific and Human”

The Reverend William McD. Tully, Rector

St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church, New York, New York

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 10:40–42

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” (Matthew 10:40–42)

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

The world is a web of welcome.

You’re welcome at home because it’s yours, and because if others live there, too, there is a relationship that guarantees welcome. If there isn’t—well, we’ll come to that later. You’re welcome in the subway because you hold a Metrocard. You’re welcome at work; that’s what a job is. And there are other places you’d be welcome if you had the inclination, or the money.

But there’s a kind of welcome that doesn’t rely on ownership or family ties, or on your having been hired, or having paid for the privilege. Places where you aren’t known, or you’re exploring. Something deeper can take over—or should.

In the ancient near east, the land of the Bible, travel and terrain were often difficult. Welcoming the stranger was of the highest value. In a parched land, in days before refrigeration, it doesn’t take much imagination to see why Jesus said that “even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones” would gain a reward.

There is no clearer mandate in the Gospel. And the Gospel is the Good News Jesus Christ brought to this world at a time when it needed to hear good news. When you welcome another person, you welcome Christ, the one whom God sent. And if the human family needed to hear that message in Jesus’ time, how much more does it need to hear it now?

We are still doing a lousy job of seeing God in one another. The hard truth is that many in the human family still feel unwelcome in the home God created on earth—the only home our family has.

The text before us today comes as part of a mandate Jesus gave to his closest disciples, that they should carry on his work of welcome. He wanted them to help transform the earth into a place where we repent of our tendency to draw false distinctions and harmful lines of exclusion. He spoke of something called “abundant life,” leaving us with the dream that every child of God could find his or her true self and have the chance to blossom in every possible way. However, there is an anxious, fearful, diseased line that divides the human family.

* * *

In Jesus, God gave everything—right up to the betrayal and the cross, and right through it to a new promise. Among other things, we learn in Jesus that from time to time we are presented with the truth we need to hear in a form we can hear it. Close. Personal. Utterly specific and human.

I have such a close and personal moment of truth to share with you today. As some of you know, my wife—my loving, beautiful and supportive companion in life for the last 37 years and ten days (Who’s counting? I am)—is not a church lady, whatever fantasy that might conjure up today. She has a life of faith; church work she leaves to me. But these days she is teaching me more about Jesus than I am teaching her.

Probably fewer of you know that she has, in these last few days—to her complete astonishment—found herself at “ground zero” in the most significant church fight of our day.

In the little patch of Christendom called the Anglican Communion, of which the Episcopal Church and St. Bart’s are proud and contributing members, some in the family of disciples have an apparently very different understanding of the human condition and the gospel of welcome. They object to the welcome our church is finally learning to give to our gay and lesbian family members.

Jane and I are the proud parents of one of those family members, our son Jonah. Jane and Jonah did not set out to teach or contend in this argument. But since Gene Robinson was consecrated as Bishop of New Hampshire, our whole family has felt oddly excluded from the debate. To us, the debate seemed to be about something abstract. It was said to be about doctrine or practice or authority or interpretation of scripture. But we felt it was about people, among them our son.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

So Jane and I reached out to other families, straight families with gay relatives, and formed a network. When the international primates—archbishops and presiding bishops—of the Anglican family came down hard on the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, our little network grew.

My wife wrote a letter, a perceptive and eloquent letter. Members of the network signed it, and she sent it to our primate, Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold. To his credit, he detected the clarity of her insight that the church family was behaving like all families, including our own, when a gay member tells the truth and “comes out” to the family.

Bishop Griswold realized that this was a voice not being heard. Family values of the families being talked about were either dismissed or ignored. He asked her to be part of a delegation to speak to the Anglican Consultative Council, which had invited our American church to say why it had welcomed Bishop Robinson and others like him into leadership.

Last Tuesday, in Nottingham, England, she gave a talk that was even more eloquent than her original letter. The only lay person among six presenters, her presence, her faith, her very motherhood, earned her a few minutes of respectful listening. Here are a few of her words. Referring to that Sunday ten years ago when Jonah bravely told us his truth, she said:

I had many questions, but three things I knew for sure:

- *First, I had loved Jonah since before he was born.*
- *Second, I knew God made him and Jesus loves him.*
- *And third, he was the same beautiful, funny, loving person now that I had always loved. Nothing had changed.*

She continued, and this is where, I hope, they really began to listen:

Now I needed to learn what it meant that his affections are drawn to men. It took time. For me, the best way to learn is to listen. So I listened to my son, because I love him. I listened to other people who have same-sex affection. I listened to other families. I listened to my husband and other people in the Episcopal Church who have been studying the human reality of same-sex affection for three decades. I listened carefully to the scriptures. I listened to Jesus. And I listened to my heart.

We all discover our sexuality planted deep within ourselves. I believe this is an essential and God-given part of our humanity. God makes most of us to love the opposite sex, and he makes some of us to love their own sex. Why? I have no idea. But it's pretty clear God likes variety. Just look at the world He has made!

The church and the world are full of families like mine. We are in your parish, in your diocese and in your province. Think about it. Even though only a small percentage of people worldwide are drawn to their own sex, nearly all those individuals have other living family members like me—parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins. Together, we represent a significant proportion of humanity. We family members are everywhere!

* * *

None of us know whether Jane's brave truth-telling will change anything. I expect it will, perhaps one heart at a time. Perhaps some clergy, including some archbishops, will finally realize that when they are talking about doctrine, it is people—their own member families—who may know more than they do. And it is those member families who may be feeling most unwelcome—even though they continue to come to church, in spite of the unwelcoming words and policies.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

There is nothing abstract about that truth. We must learn to live it—to offer ourselves as cups of water to those parched for a word of welcome.

We in the church have a great deal more to say and do. The life of mature faith rests in the dimension of depth, where there are no easy answers. It calls each of us to live lovingly in the light, to be faithful to one another, to build strong and lasting families, to reach out to those in need and to praise God in the company of God's welcoming family.

It is not easy to live that life, or to call people to know it and live it for themselves. But I am certain that if we do not welcome others—radically welcome others, unconditionally welcome them—they will not, and they cannot, hear us. You can't mold and shape people if you won't let them into the family. If we do not welcome them, they will rightly feel that what we say and do is of no earthly interest or possibility for them.

And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

What Jane did last week in Nottingham was to extend the web of welcome. She spoke the truth we need to hear in a form we can hear it. Close. Personal. Utterly specific and very human. The way God always tells it. The only way we know the welcome is real.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

What Jane did last week in Nottingham was to extend the web of welcome. She spoke the truth we need to hear in a form we can hear it. Close. Personal. Utterly specific and very human. The way God always tells it. The only way we know the welcome is real.



“A Word to the Saints: Installation Sermon”

The Reverend Altagracia Perez, Rector
Holy Faith Episcopal Church, Inglewood, California

NOVEMBER 2, 2003

It seemed fitting to have this celebration of a new ministry at the same time we celebrate All Saints Day. The saints are all those in whom the Holy Spirit has been invited to dwell, and who have been set apart for a sacred purpose. There are famous saints, who because of their exemplary lives are remembered with special days of commemoration. We look at them and are inspired. We read about their lives and we are moved. Different saints stand out for different people; we identify with their mission, with their lives or with their deaths. It could be Saint Faith, our patron, a young woman who would not worship idols, speaking truth to those who persecuted her, saying that she could not pray to a false God having come to know the real God. Or it could be Mother Teresa, whose compassion and holy presence with those who are suffering highlights the sacredness of all and the power of the human community to comfort and strengthen. We admire saints like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi and Joan of Arc, people who throughout history stood for truth, justice, mercy and compassion, people who changed history in their lifetimes, with their lives.

The only danger is that when we focus on these saints we forget that we are celebrating *All Saints Day*, and we think this is a day for the famous. We exclude ourselves from this company, because in our own assessment we never quite measure up. We forget what our reading reminds us of, that there are many great women and men whose names may not be remembered by all but whose acts are not forgotten, and who also glorified God in their time through their lives. As Holy Faith prepares to continue this new phase of its spiritual journey it is a good time to take a moment and reflect on how God may be using us to glorify himself in our day.

Being one of the newest members of this community makes it easy for me to see how God can and is using Holy Faith. We live in the most diverse, and often the most conflicted, state in the country. Los Angeles County, and Southern California in general, is home to too many nationalities, languages and cultures to mention. People arrive with a similar dream but a very different idea about the details of living the dream out. We want freedom, but with freedom come the challenges of diversity.

Yes, we are all free to be ourselves, and to worship and politic as we believe, but that means we are constantly having to negotiate, compromise and communicate in a way that is not so conspicuous in a more homogenous community. They may struggle with personality differences but we add to that the fact that we don't even all agree what words mean when we are speaking the same language.

In this reality Holy Faith is called to be a Pentecost community, a place where all hear the gospel in their own language, even when far away from home. I don't mean this literally—I have counted at least six formal languages spoken here, and it would be too difficult to worship in everyone's native tongue—but a place where the good news, regardless of your race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, or age, is heard; where you are heard; where you are respected and you are embraced.

Now this is a serious call. If we are not careful we could end up looking and sounding more like the tower of Babel than like the new Pentecost community. There are a few crucial things that we will need to do in order to manage the challenge before us.

I know you might say, “but we know how to do that already.” The truth is that our journey toward building a just, inclusive and diverse community is not done. It will probably never be completely done. Although we have come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, there is now much work that we have to do. Not the work of coming together, but the work for which we were brought together. I believe that God called me through you to participate in this work, but I am going to need us to be mindful of some things that will be required of all of us. For those of you who are not literally members of this community, you are also workers in this vineyard, so take notes, and take heart.

We will have to learn more about good communication. We will have to be life-long learners. We will need to stick it out and we will have to celebrate *a lot*. There is no common language for us anymore. Even when we are all talking in English, what we mean, what we expect and how we function is different. The most annoying thing is that for us there will never be a consistent way “we have always done it” that is not open to review and revision. We will need to be clear about our expectations, detailed in our descriptions and then patient when it still doesn't seem like “they” understood us.

We will have to really adopt an attitude of a learner. Not a tolerant attitude, you understand (where we still may think “they do it the wrong way”), but one that accepts that there are really other ways of doing things and that we will be better people for having learned (sometimes against our will) to be flexible and open.

We will have to be willing to come to each other when we disagree or are upset about something and not just bail. When something happens that we don't like, we will have to communicate directly with those responsible, commit to working it through and not avoid the unpleasantness of difference. We will need to party hard,

because this is hard work and it is difficult to keep up our strength if we do not stop, rest, eat, drink and be merry.

If we make this commitment together, we will reflect the community we have been called to be in Christ.

You will especially need to be forgiving and patient with me, as I figure out where all your buttons are and learn not push them so hard. But I am looking forward to the years of ministry that we will have together, and the ways we will impact Inglewood with the gospel of a Jesus Christ who does not want us all to be the same, as if created by a cookie cutter. The work for God that we will accomplish and invite others to enjoy with us.

So saints, may the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in you, direct and uphold you in the service of Christ and his kingdom. Amen.



“Cooking the Gospel on Your Own Stove”

Church Divinity School of the Pacific Commencement Address

The Reverend Edwin Bacon Jr., Rector
All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 16:24–27

As I was leaving the theology school from which I graduated, the only piece of advice I remember was a word from one of my New Testament professors, Dr. Leander Keck. He took me aside after his last seminar session with us and said, “Ed, you have chosen a rich academic journey here. I think you have been exposed to an excellent education. Now, whatever you do, do not take this material and merely serve it to your people the same way you have received it in class.” Then placing the tip of his right index finger on my heart and leaning in close to my face, looking me straight in the eyes, he said, “Before passing this education on you have to cook it on your own stove.”

It was not until you, the graduating class of CDSP assigned me to preach on the texts appointed for today did I make the connection between that piece of advice given upon my seminary departure and the piece of advice Jesus gives his disciples in this morning’s gospel when he says to them (and to you and me), “Take up *your* cross and follow me.”

In order for the Gospel to have relevance, to have flesh, to have skin on for ourselves and for those around us I believe it is incumbent upon us as we are following Jesus to do so with *our own crosses*—not the cross of our seminary professors or the crosses of our mentors or of our own favorite ministers of our past—not even the cross of Jesus—but our own cross, our *own* Good Fridays, or as one translation puts it, our own instruments of death, our own triggers and buttons, our own issues, oppressions, target social status. We must walk and proclaim the way of the Gospel of God’s Reign, cooking it on our own stoves. . . .

I believe that the Gospel (or what a former spiritual director of mine from Sri Lanka called the “Kin-dom” Life), is at its depths the interplay this morning’s texts give us—the interplay between fear and love and self-offering. The Life to which Jesus calls us is, I believe, the life of working out in every moment what roles the

three dynamics of fear, love, and self-offering are going to play. When you and I take up our own unique constellation of issues—and I have come to believe that those issues always are about our unique gifts, passions, vocations and neuroses, our race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and sexual orientation—when you and I take up our own unique constellation of issues and align our life formula with that of Jesus’ life formula about the role of fear and love and how we will give our lives away—*then* we are walking witnesses of the Gospel and the Kingdom Life.

It was Henri Nouwen’s book, *Lifesigns*, that first awakened within me the organizing principles of the interplay of fear and love. In that deceptively thin volume, Henri Nouwen describes the interplay between love and fear as he understood it playing out in Jesus’ life. Nouwen argues that in every moment every human being is living either out of the house of fear or the house of love.

“We are fearful people,” Nouwen asserts. “Fear has become an obvious dwelling place, an acceptable basis on which to make our decisions and plan our lives. Those we fear have a great power over us. Those who can make us afraid can also make us do what they want us to do. People are afraid for many reasons, but I am convinced that the close connection between power and fear deserves special attention. So much power is wielded by instilling fear in people and keeping them afraid. . . . As long as we are kept in fear we can be made to act, speak, and even think as slaves. . . . The agenda of our world—the issues and items that fill newspapers and newscasts—is an agenda of fear and power. It is amazing, yes frightening, to see how easily that agenda becomes ours.”¹

Henri Nouwen penned these words twenty years ago. Yet, every time that I have reflected on these words since we entered into our post-9/11 world, I have been astounded at their chilling relevance to our times—now, when the Empire of the United States has become the fear-producing factory for us in the U.S. and for everyone the world over, and particularly for those who are Muslim.

Nouwen goes on to say, “The things and people we think about, worry about, reflect upon, prepare ourselves for, and spend time and energy on are in large part determined by a world which seduces us into accepting its fearful questions.”

And then comes the clincher for us who claim to follow Jesus. Nouwen says, “But fearful questions never led to love-filled answers; underneath every fearful question many other fearful questions are hidden. . . . Fear engenders fear. Fear never gives birth to love. A careful look at the gospels shows that Jesus seldom accepted the questions posed to him. He exposed them as coming from the house of fear. ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ ‘How often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?’ ‘Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife on any pretext whatever?’ ‘What authority do you have for acting like this?’ . . . ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Lord, has the hour come?’ ‘Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ To none of these questions did Jesus give a direct answer. He gently put

1. Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*, (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 15.

them aside as questions emerging from false worries. They were raised out of concern for prestige, influence, power, and control. They did not belong to the house of God. Therefore Jesus always transformed the question by his answer. He made the question new—and only then worthy of his response.”²

My brothers and sisters, you and I have a Jesus-given responsibility to learn in our own heart and in our own transactions how to take the fear-based questions the church and the members of the church are throwing at us and do what Jesus did. We are called to expose the questions that come at us from the House of Fear as just that—the opposite of what Jesus called us to do when he said at every turn, “Fear not.”

We are called to forswear fear. Jesus calls us to follow him in gently setting aside questions coming from false worries, concern for prestige, influence, power, control, and empire. Jesus calls us to follow him in gently setting aside questions coming from anxious questions rooted in an inauthentic unity which has no justice in it, and an inauthentic orthodoxy which has no on-going revelation by the Holy Spirit in it—questions not belonging to the house of God. My friends, if we do not do this we will lose our lives and souls in the effort to save them and never come to the experience of glory that comes when a person or church or seminary or House of Bishops or House of Deputies lose their life for Jesus’ sake and the sake of the Good News of love and thereby find their voices and souls.

What will it profit the Episcopal Church if we gain the whole world and gain vapid unity and vacuous orthodoxy and in the process lose our soul because we are too distracted and scared to bring an end to an unjust, illegal, and immoral war in Iraq that is costing one billion U.S. dollars and hundreds of lives of God’s children every month? What will it profit the Episcopal Church if we gain the whole world and gain vapid unity and vacuous orthodoxy and in the process lose our soul because we are too distracted and scared and silent to bring an end to a genocide in Darfur, the growing gap between rich and poor in the U.S. and the world, the absence of health care and education for millions of children, and the bruised and rejected lives of the GLBT community who cannot marry the love of their lives? Jesus asks, “What can you offer in exchange for your very self?” We will sing as we exit today praying that God will save us from being rich in things and poor in soul.

Well, we need to give God a helping hand. And the answer is in the third issue of the gospel: what will we give our lives for? Jesus answered that question on the Cross, but my friends, the Cross was secondary. For Jesus would never have known what to die for on the Cross if he hadn’t answered the question of what he would give his life for at the Table. The Table, the Table—home to outcasts and sinners. That’s what got Jesus into trouble and that’s what can get you and me into Gospel trouble if we will just use it as the radical place of love trumping or casting out fear in the way that Jesus intended.

2. Ibid., 16–19.

My friend, Greg Boyle, Jesuit priest who has a reputation for working with gangs in East L.A., says that he refuses to work with gangs. “I don’t work with gangs,” he says—“I don’t go to their meetings, their reunions, their family days in the park because everything having to do with gangs is about placing conditions on love. I work with people who want to come out of gangs. I try to create a space where people can literally know and feel what it is like to have a community where there are no conditions placed on love.” That, my friends, is what Jesus created at the Table and what you and I are called to create in the space called the Church—a place where fear-based questions can be gently set aside and human beings can breathe in God’s love for them that has no conditions—whoever they are and wherever they are on the journey of faith, each person can be nourished and embraced and have their feet washed and know and feel that God loves their very being and that in that love there is absolutely no need to fear. The issue facing the Anglican Communion today is whether we will be a gang or the Body of Christ. Will the Episcopal Church be a gang or the Body of Christ? Will our seminaries be a gang or the Body of Christ? Will our parishes be a gang or the Body of Christ? Will our individual hearts be gang-like, placing conditions on our love or will they be like the heart of Christ—love for everyone without condition?

There once was a survey that asked people what they most wanted to hear said to them. After thousands of people were surveyed those who conducted the survey were very surprised that there were three things at the top of everyone’s list. The survey said that the three things that everyone wants to hear are: first, “I love you.” Everyone also wants to hear “I forgive you.” And finally everyone wants to hear “Supper is ready.”

My brothers and sisters, if we forswear a fearful heart and let the Spirit of Jesus and God’s love come into us and give our lives away creating spaces where others can know how deeply God loves them without condition—if we can cook this on our own stoves, so that others feel these words coming from our insides out: you are loved, you are forgiven—then we will have a reason to also say, supper is ready. Now, let’s come to this table and eat.

Amen.



“Beckoned to the Banquet”³

The Reverend Tracey Lind, Dean
Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 9:9–13, 18–26

*He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, liar, a thing to flout
But love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took him in.*⁴

This is my favorite poem. It’s what I would like carved on my gravestone. It speaks to my own sense of Christian discipleship, about what it means to be a follower of Jesus—a Christ bearer.

I understand God to be the power of love: extravagant, indiscriminate, abundant, unconditional, all-inclusive love. I understand Jesus to be the embodiment of that love; he loved extravagantly, indiscriminately, abundantly, and unconditionally. I understand discipleship to be a commitment to extravagantly, indiscriminately, abundantly, and unconditionally demonstrate that love. I don’t do it very well, but I know it’s what I’m supposed to do if I call myself a Christian disciple—a follower of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus said to the Pharisees as they criticized him for eating with tax collectors and sinners: “Go and learn what this text means, ‘I desire steadfast mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (Matthew 9:13)

The word Greek word for “mercy” is derived from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means God’s faithful and merciful love. According to Jesus, to offer mercy according to Jesus means to extend faithful and merciful love. When Jesus told the folks to “go and learn what this text means,” he was referring to a phrase used by both the prophets Micah and Hosea.⁵ God said to the exiled people of Israel, “I don’t want sacrifices made in the temple; I want *hesed*—that is, I want your faithful and merciful love.” What God demands and expects of God’s people is nothing more and nothing less than what God offers from the divine self: extravagant, indiscriminate, undeserved, abundant, unconditional, all-inclusive love.

3. Excerpted from Lind’s *Interrupted by God: Glimpses from the Edge* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2004). Reprinted with permission.

4. Edwin Markham, “Outwitted,” *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, 15th edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 671.

5. In this passage, Jesus is actually quoting Hosea 6:6, but the same phrase is found in Micah 6:8.

This love offered by God, demanded and expected of God's people, was embodied in the person of Jesus. Jesus loved everybody: tax collectors and tax payers; pious women and those of ill repute; high ranking military officers and conscientious objectors; the deaf, the blind and the lame. Jesus loved the brilliant scholar and the village idiot; the ruthless merchant and the honest farmer; the exalted governor and the common thief; the rich and the poor; the oppressed and the oppressor; the clean and the unclean; the religious and the non-religious. Nobody was exempt from his love. Jesus also loved the birds of the air, the animals of the land, and the fish of the sea. He loved the flowers, the grass, the trees, the water, the sun, the moon, and the stars. Jesus loved the earth, the sky, the universe, and the rest of God's creation.

Nobody and nothing was exempt from his love. Jesus loved people whom nobody else could love. He loved folks who couldn't love each other. He loved individuals who couldn't love themselves. He loved those who had looked for love in all the wrong places. He even loved those who tried to destroy him. "Abba, forgive them" were his words of unconditional love. Jesus' love was not about respectability; it was about acceptance. Thus he said, "I have not come to call the self-righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13)

Jesus' table fellowship—those with whom he ate—was symbolic of his all-inclusive love. Everybody was invited to Jesus' dinner table, and if you showed up you couldn't be certain who else would be in attendance. Sometimes, it would be quite a surprise. Imagine receiving an invitation to the party of a very important person—the most popular kid in school or the most prestigious family in town. You probably would feel that you were special because you were invited to this particular party. You probably would be flattered, because you thought you weren't very important, maybe even a nobody. You accepted the invitation without hesitancy. You made all of your preparations. You got to the party and guess who else was there: all the other nobodies in town; plus all the losers; all the outcasts; and all the despised and despicable folks around town. How would you then feel?

This is exactly what happened when Jesus gave a dinner party, and the disciples often had a hard time with his guest list. But whenever they challenged his enlarging of the circle or sought to protect him from the unseemly folks, he rebuked them. "Blessed are the poor and hungry," said Jesus; not blessed are the respectable, the successful and the self-confident. Our Lord was one hundred percent clear—there are no insiders and no outsiders in God's domain. All are included because it is the very nature of God's love to include us all.

Now we come to the church—the beloved body of Christ. Does the church really love in the inclusive spirit of Jesus? We have made so many rules about who's in and who's out; what kind of love is acceptable and what's not; who's invited to the party; and who can or cannot feast at the table. In my humble opinion, the continuing debate over homosexuality, women in the ordained ministry, salvation, and an open invitation to the communion table—as well as the ongoing struggle with race and class in the church—is an utter embarrassment. It misses the whole point of Jesus'

ministry. Frankly, I can understand why so many spiritual seekers avoid church; it's not always very spiritual; nor does it really welcome seekers. We've forgotten, or maybe like some of the disciples, we never really learned the essential message of Jesus—radical, abundant, indiscriminate, extravagant, inclusive love.

I learned about *hesed* from a most unlikely group of people—commercial sex workers, commonly known as prostitutes. For twelve years I worked with the prostitutes in Paterson, New Jersey. The corner in front of my former church was, in fact, one of the principal prostitution hot spots in all of northern New Jersey. The women who worked on my corner came in all shapes and sizes: as young as fourteen and as old as forty; black, white, Hispanic and Asian; poor, middle class and even wealthy; single and married; with and without children—often with children in the child welfare system. Many were HIV positive; some had full-blown AIDS, tuberculosis, hepatitis, and other infectious diseases. Many had outstanding bench warrants and other legal difficulties. Some were gregarious and outgoing; others were shy and reserved. Some were very smart and some had serious learning differences; a few were mentally ill, and most were depressed. Almost all were addicted to one drug or another.

In the beginning of my tenure, I would pass the women standing on the corner as I pulled in and out of the church parking lot. They were doing their work and I was doing mine. I would wave; some would wave back; and other would glare at me or avoid my eyes. Then I started walking by them and saying hello. Again, some would respond; others would stare at me or avoid my eyes altogether. At block club meetings, I would listen to my neighbors complain about the prostitutes. At clergy meetings, I would listen to my colleagues condemn them. As for me, I was both fascinated and repelled by these women. They were some of the smartest, funniest, most ingenious, courageous, capable, and messed up women I've ever met. I was simultaneously fearful and curious about them. I both admired and pitied them. It was a come-close, go-away sort of reaction: a combination of voyeurism and honest concern.

One day, it dawned on me; these women of “ill repute” were part of my geographic parish. While I worked inside the church, they worked on the outside. In the words folk singer Leonard Cohen, “They were sisters of mercy.”⁶ They ministered to the lonely and the broken-hearted, just like me. In fact, pushing the metaphor a little, they ran a church of sorts on the same block. Moreover, just like me, these women were made in the image of God. They were my neighbors, my sisters in Christ, a part of God's beloved creation; and I needed to get to know them. So I did.

At first, I shared cigarettes, coffee and donuts with them. We had cautious and casual conversation about the weather, the block, and neighborhood gossip. Then

6. “The Sisters of Mercy,” Copyright Leonard Cohen and Sony/ATV Music Publishing Canada Company.

over meals at McDonalds, we began to talk about our work: my ministry to redevelop this inner city parish and their activities on the street. I would ask questions about their work, and they answered honestly, sometimes saying, “Rev. Tracey, you don’t really want to know about that, do you?” As time passed, we became more than acquaintances but not yet real friends. When they would disappear for a while, I would worry. But they would reappear saying they had been locked up or drying out. It was a vicious cycle of addiction, sex and arrest. Eventually, I raised some money and hired an outreach worker; and now, a dozen years later, my former church runs a large outreach program that works with literally hundreds of commercial sex workers throughout the region.

Over the years, I became pastor and priest for some of these women. But one thing never really changed; they never felt very comfortable in church. Once in a while, they would come in and sit quietly in the sanctuary by themselves. If they were getting sober and staying off of the streets, they might even attend a church service. But if they were active—working on the streets—they felt unworthy of being in the house of God. They might arrange to have a child baptized, and then wouldn’t show up for the baptism. They would say, “Rev. Tracey, I’m going to surprise you one day and join the church,” but it rarely happened.

Then one year, just around the time of World AIDS Day, two women died of the virus and another woman was murdered on the street—her battered body discovered by the railroad tracks. I was invited to the women’s support group to talk about their loss. Well, did we ever talk about God, sin, sex, forgiveness, humility, addiction, healing, abandonment, rejection, anger. You name it; we talked about it. At the end of the meeting I said to them, “Would you like to do something in church for your friends who had died?” They said yes, and I suggested that World AIDS Day might be an appropriate time. They agreed and we began working on a service. We picked hymns to sing, wrote prayers to say, and decided who would do what. It was unlike any liturgical planning process that I had learned in seminary.

The long-anticipated night arrived, and people began showing up. The lights in the church were dimmed and candles were lit. The youth group was there, as were others from the congregation and community. After all, it was World AIDS Day. Frankly, I didn’t know if the women were going to show up, and I was ready to cover, just in case. But at exactly 7:30, when the service was about to begin, the women came in *en masse*. They took their places in the front of the church and led the worship. They said the prayers and read the lessons. And some of them decided to testify—to share their stories with the attentive and inquisitive congregation. One by one they stood up at the lectern and told their stories of life on the street as a prostitute. Then they lit candles for sisters who had died: killed by the virus, killed by the drugs, killed by the pimps and johns—dead from a life of prostitution, addiction, disease, poverty and despair. We sang a closing hymn, I said a blessing, and we all had cookies and punch. It was a remarkable evening. There was a healing on that night, and the outcast women of the street were the healers.

When the morning light came, some of my “sisters of mercy” were back on the corner again. What happened—I don’t know for certain. What I do know was that Jesus gave a party and we all showed up. And life was different, at least for a moment.

Several months later, during Holy Week, the congregation was gathered for our traditional Liberation Feast on Maundy Thursday. A number of the women from the streets joined us that evening, and when it came time for the foot washing, they presented themselves at the basin. After supper, the gathered community walked through the parking lot of the church on the way into our sanctuary to strip the altar for Good Friday. Several people paused to look up the night sky—hoping to see Haley’s Comet. As we gazed upward, a flock of wild geese, the ancient Celtic symbol for the Holy Spirit, flew in perfect formation over our urban parking lot right under Haley’s Comet. It was an extraordinary sight. We all stood there looking up at the sky, and one of the sisters of mercy quietly whispered to me, “God is good,” and I responded, “All the time.”



“Against Inclusivity: Reclaiming Our Ministry as Latinos”⁷

The Rev. Juan M.C. Oliver, Ph.D.

Director, Hispanic/Latino Program in Theology and Pastoral Ministry
General Theological Seminary, New York, New York

As a Latino Episcopalian, I am against being included.

The interpersonal dynamics of “inclusion” always involve an “includer” and an “included.” The first is active, the second passive. “Hispanics” (an Anglo name for us) are always being offered inclusion. In the Episcopal Church, Latinos (what we call ourselves) are always being invited, included and ministered to. We never get to do anything for ourselves. This usually means that we are welcome guests in someone else’s house. But I am a member of the household of God, and shown to be a child of God in Baptism. It is insulting for my brothers and sisters to tell me they want to include me when God has already done so. Clearly we need a different model of intercultural relations; in what follows I use worship as the arena in which this model might be lived out.

Since we are ministered *to*, I am grateful for the opportunity to say something rather than hear or receive it from (usually Anglo) well-intentioned speakers and givers.

If Latinos are going to be active, free agents of our ministry, we have the task before us of developing our ministry, theology and liturgy as we see fit, in conversation with not only the history and tradition of the Christian people (which Christian people? There have been so many!) and our own existential situation. We have taken great strides in the last decade. One of the areas of success is the location of our theology firmly in the Latino experience of poverty and privation. For Latino theologians poverty is, rightly, a place of revelation. This insight connects Latino theologians in the U.S. with Latin American theological movements of the last thirty years or so.

But unlike our counterparts in Latin America, Latinos in the U.S. have another experience which, has not yet been named as a theological starting point: our experience of learning another culture: Anglo culture. And like poverty, our experience of learning a second culture is a theological gold mine.

7. I am grateful to the The Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest for inviting me to give this talk at the *Teología en Conjunto* conference of Hispanic/Latino Theologians convened there in 2001.

Once we are “over here” (sometimes even before we arrive) Latinos in the United States spend most of our time learning Anglo ways. We learn, slowly and patiently, the myriad ways in which the verb “to get” can be combined with prepositions to mean almost anything. We learn that life is possible without subjunctives; we learn to tell time in a different way, and that people here are individuals, and that the family has usually just four people if you’re lucky. We learn that religion is a matter of free choice and that “if you can think it, you can do it.” We learn that it is possible to be “a self-made man.” We learn that here being poor makes you morally suspect.

In short, since we spend all our time learning Anglo culture, most Latinos with a few years’ experience in the U.S.—even Latinos with very little education—are experts in multicultural ministry. We minister constantly to people of a different culture from ours: we clean their homes, care for their children, pick their vegetables, some of us even teach their seminarians and grade their term papers. So I suggest that we Latino theologians include the experience of learning to be bicultural as a theological place of revelation, in addition to Latino poverty.

This may lead us to discover that our experience of learning Anglo ways reveals to us something about God and life which we did not know before; something that forms us as a people and which makes us who we are as immigrants to the U.S.: *Anglo culture is NOT God*. God is much bigger than culture(s).

By dint of having to survive and thrive through a process of learning another culture, we have discovered that culture and its components—language, manners, rituals, body language, etc.—are multiplex! We have discovered that the world created by a given culture for those who belong to it is a world *among other worlds*. Our experience reveals that there are many ways of being in the world, not only our own way, and that each way builds up its own world with its traditions, assumptions, values, virtues and even sins. The bicultural person knows—from actual experience, not merely theoretically—that “the way things are” is many ways; that there are other ways of doing whatever must be done “just this way.”

This revelation is dangerous knowledge, for in the eyes of monocultural people, it undermines the stability of the world. But God has made the world so firm that it cannot be shaken. It is no wonder then, that we who know that “the world” is many worlds are best kept at bay and ministered *to*. For the fact is, even monocultural people are clever enough to know that if we Latinos were permitted to act out our world, we may well construct and express a different world right in the middle of theirs.

Latino bicultural ability is not only a source of great anxiety for monocultural folks who realize in their bones that we truly are beyond their control. It is also source of spiritual development for us, and a foundational experience for our liturgical praxis.

Our spirituality as bicultural people, shaped by the experience that culture is not God, frees us to let God be God, unconfused with “the way things are,” and allows our experience of God to be a God who contemplates—even promotes—different worlds co-existing cheek by jowl.

As a liturgist I find this deeply consoling. It means that liturgical do's and don'ts are relative, for they are determined by culture, not by God, and so they are—as the Reformers knew so well, fallible and like the Church herself, always in need of being reformed. Even the structure of the Eucharistic Prayer itself is not written up in heaven. But our names are, each in its own language.

If my experience as a bicultural person is that ways of worship are many—as many as there are cultures and subcultures—I can then relax my grip on liturgy and instead open my hand to receive a liturgical practice from another world—in my personal case the Anglo world in the U.S. And so, this Latino has grown to enjoy not only good Anglo hymns but even occasionally bad, interminable, boring ones, too. I have even grown to learn that less can be more, and can enjoy an Anglo liturgy designed with Zen aesthetics, even though my Latino self keeps wanting a profusion of flowers, saints, candles, litanies, incense, gold leaf and color—for in the Reign of God, there is no poverty.

In sum: experiencing the multiplicity of cultural worlds teaches me to free myself from such cultural determinisms in worship, as “Anglican worship must have Anglican chant in it” or, “Hispanic prayer books in the Episcopal Church must be translated literally from Anglo prayer books.” This cultural determinism has brought us to the sad state of Latino worship in the Episcopal Church today, where Latino worship is basically Anglo worship in Spanish. Only after our Latino congregations have actively developed their ways of worship as Latino Episcopalians, will we have a real Latino Episcopal liturgy. In my experience this has not taken place yet, and it will not happen overnight.

For it to happen, two things must take place. First, the Episcopal Church must return liturgical agency to its minority populations. This means, practically, that instead of sending out liturgical resources translated from English, our dioceses and the national church need to spend more time encouraging liturgical creativity and praxis in our Latino congregations. Second, it means that Latino Episcopalians must grow up as liturgical agents and stop living off Anglo liturgical welfare. We must take up our ministry—even our liturgical ministry—and create it, articulating new forms of worship.

Of course, we invite Anglos to join us in our ministry. The fields are white and there are not nearly enough of us to harvest. But Anglos who generously want to assist Latinos in our ministry must be extremely careful lest their imposing presence shut us up in the process; careful lest their Anglo liturgical praxis swallow up our nascent Latino Episcopal liturgy. Moreover, since we spend our entire time learning Anglo culture, it is very tempting for us to just give up our own Latino liturgical instincts and do things the Anglo way. Sometimes this even gets us promoted.

It turns out then that our liturgical agency is deeply connected to our biculturalism. But it must be agency, not passivity. Our homework as Latino worshippers is to create our worship.

What I have said above about worship may be extended to all facets of the Church's life. In all of them, from governance to theology to formation, to stewardship, Latinos must take up the reins of our ministry and do it, deeply aware that just because a format or program works for Anglo Episcopalians, it does not necessarily work for Latinos.

As a corollary to this, the most important liturgical statement an Anglo can make to a Latino is not, "Let me show you how to do this," but, "Tell me, how do you do it?" We'd love to tell you.