September 1, 2013 – Pentecost 15 (Proper 17)

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I have to admit that I struggled with this sermon this week. Not because the texts were difficult – as a matter of fact, these are some of the most straightforward texts that I've ever had to deal with.

The letter to the Hebrews is all about mutual love and caring for one another and for those less fortunate than we are, and letting our lives be one continuous sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God. The Gospel is all about the first being last and the last being first, and the blessing of hospitality to those who offer it.

All of this is pretty basic sermon fodder, and ordinarily I'm sure I could come up with something meaningful to say about it. It's not the text that's bothering me today, it's what's going on in the world. It appears that we are on the brink of yet another military action in the Middle East – this time in retaliation for the chemical attacks in Syria.

I absolutely don't want to get involved in the politics of this, but I have to tell you that I think what we're contemplating is horribly, terribly wrong. And I'm at a loss as to what to do about it, or even how to articulate what it is that I'm feeling.

So let me go back to the Gospel for a little, and hopefully put these events into some kind of theological context.

The scene is the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, where Jesus has been invited to a Sabbath dinner. Our translation says that they were watching him closely. The Greek verb used here is *paratereo*, which means to observe scrupulously, so they were watching him VERY closely.. The reason for this intense scrutiny was probably to see if he did anything improper on the Sabbath again. You remember that he healed the woman with the crooked back on the Sabbath, and, in chapter 6, he healed a man with a withered hand, also on the Sabbath.

So they were watching to see what he would do in a private home, away from the synagogues where he had done those other healings. And sure enough, Jesus doesn't disappoint! There's a chunk of text that's been omitted from our lectionary reading today that describes Jesus healing a man right in front of them. And once again, like last week, he ran rings around them logically as to why it was proper to heal someone on the Sabbath.

So while he has the Pharisees' full attention, Jesus takes the opportunity to tell a couple of parables. The first one is ostensibly about proper seating protocol. He noticed that the guests at the dinner were jockeying for the best positions at the table. Since the Pharisees were influential, and probably rich, sitting as close as possible to the host was a good way of showing others how rich and influential YOU were, too. But Jesus says to them that if you take a high place at the table you run the risk of getting booted lower if someone more important comes in after you. VERY embarrassing.

He suggests an alternative strategy – swallow your pride and sit at the lowest place at the table and wait for the host to invite you up higher, thereby honoring you. He finishes this parable with the familiar phrase, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This must have thrown his hosts and the other guests into major confusion!

The second parable must have been even more confusing to his Pharisee host. When you throw a dinner party, don't invite the usual suspects – your family, friends and rich neighbors, especially if you're only inviting them in order to get a prestigious invitation in return. Instead, go out into the streets and invite the homeless, the mentally ill, the downtrodden, and the disabled to your party. This is how you will be blessed by God, by extending your hospitality to people who can't possible repay you.

So what do these two parables have to do with each other, and what do they have to say about our current state of affairs?

The main thing they have in common is the imperative that Jesus gives us to put the needs of others before our own. This isn't a new concept in the Gospels, but it is a radical change in the way we live our lives. And it flies in the face of all we're bombarded with in this country – advertisement, business, entertainment. We live in a Me First society, and to follow Christ means to turn our backs on that.

This is where I think we're going wrong in our handling of this current Middle East crisis. I can't claim to understand all the ins and outs of international relations, but I do know that war is what happens when diplomacy breaks down. But we haven't even tried much diplomacy, not really. We've threatened and drawn red lines in the sand and postured, but we haven't tried real diplomacy, at least not that I've seen.

And yet, here we are about to attack yet another country, and put innocent lives in danger. We say we're doing it because the Syrian government has broken international laws, but we haven't always jumped in, bombs first, when other countries have done that. What about Rwanda? What about Darfur? What about North Korea? I'm not necessarily advocating that we take military action in those places, but why Syria? Why now?

I think part of the answer lies in our collective hubris. In our reading from Sirach today, we heard,

"The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations."

We continuously call ourselves the most powerful nation on earth, and militarily, that's probably true. But we have convinced ourselves that we can't back down. Our national pride won't let us. We've started to believe our own propaganda.

Well, military power isn't everything. In the grand scheme of things, in the Gospel scheme of things, it's not anything at all. Rome was arguably the most powerful nation on earth in Jesus' time, and yet, Rome was ultimately conquered by a simple Galilean carpenter with radical ideas about selflessness and love.

And what can we do? Well, we can write to our lawmakers, and even the President, to express our feelings, at least those of us who feel that this approach is wrong. It might help, but it's been my experience that politicians mostly do what they want, no matter what the people who voted for them say. Or we can start or join organized protests, which sometimes have a small effect, but more often they get spun by the media until they're unrecognizable.

But what we can do, and maybe most importantly, is to be the Body of Christ in the world. We can give generously and love radically. And the place to start is right here. Right here at this table – God's table – where Jesus has invited us to his banquet. This is where we find the strength to serve. This is where we find the joy in sacrifice. This is where the Holy Spirit renews us all to face the challenges of a world gone crazy. And this is where we find the peace of God, which passes all understanding.

And as we leave this table, don't forget to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, to your own table, in whatever way you can. Don't forget to humble yourself before others. Don't neglect to do good and share what you can, as it says in Hebrews. And you WILL be blessed. Amen.