

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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Welcoming Strangers and Angels

When all is said and done, what will little Lucian Slater remember from any of us? Today we baptized Lucian, and we promised – every one here – to teach him about love, about the things that matter in life.

It's not just his grandparents, or parents, his aunts or uncles or godparents. We all promised.

When all is said and done, what will any child remember you?

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Let me tell you about my grandmother's present to me.

Today during the baptism, I poured water into the baptismal font from a silver pitcher that had been my grandmother's. I recently unpacked things that had once been hers, and the pitcher was among them. It hadn't been used for a long time, so it was dark and tarnished, and it took me awhile, with the silver polish, to make it shine and glow again.

As I polished I uncovered an inscription on the pitcher. It had been given to her upon her retirement from the Illinois Legislature, where she served in the 1950's and '60's, and rose to become Chair of the House Committee on Education. That was an unusual role for women back in those decades – there were few women among many elected men. But she cared so much about schools, about education, and she was so wise that she'd served, and made a difference in the lives of many, I am sure.

But as a child, I knew little of that: her titles and her places of honor are not what I most remember about her. Neither is it the silver she passed on to me. What I most remember about my grandmother is how she treated the lonely – how she invited them to eat at her table.

Pauline was the name of the old woman who lived across the street from my grandmother. To me, as a child, she was a frightening: she was bent and rarely emerged from her home. Pauline was a chain smoker, her voice was deep and craggy, and her skin hung loose in ragged wrinkles around her face. She lived in a huge house, but most of it was always dark – we never saw movement behind the windows, and many of the curtains were drawn - because Pauline lived in only a few rooms now, close to the back door. She'd inherited her house, won it through some bitter squabble with her siblings –and none of them spoke to her anymore.

I would have preferred that my grandmother didn't always invite Pauline to our special family dinners. My family lived far from my grandmother, days drive away, and I got to see her only once a year. I loved our special family dinners gathered with my grandmother, and as a child I didn't really want strangers there, people I didn't know.

But it was always my job to go get Pauline. I'd be sent down the long walkway from the safety of my grandmother's house, walk up the driveway to Pauline's back door, and always find her waiting right inside the shadowy darkness, sitting in a small chair by the door with everything ready – her coat and her cane and her boots. Together we'd walk back to my grandmother's, with Pauline holding my arm and leaning on me, both us taking our small steps back towards the waiting banquet.

And Jesus said, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not just invite your friends or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the lame, those who cannot repay you, and you will be repaid in a deeper way...."

What will any child remember from us adults? Whether we welcomed the stranger, whether we invited in someone lost or lonely.

Why? Because in our deepest heart of hearts, we all know that we are that one, the stranger. If not today, then yesterday, or maybe tomorrow, each of us is the stranger, the one who knows no one. Each of us is the lost and lonely, hoping to be remembered. Each of us wonders if anyone will invite us to Thanksgiving dinner. Haven't you know that feeling sometime? So from a very early age, we all pay attention. What will any child remember? Whether we welcomed the stranger.

That's why Mother Theresa took our breath away, because when she saw a crumpled body on the dirty streets of India -- someone all the rest of us stepped over, rushed past, thought we couldn't possibly do something about -- she saw Christ, and she stooped down to cradle that one's head in her lap, to wipe his forehead.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., commemorated this week for the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, took our breath away, because when he saw his black brothers and sisters hung and beaten, demeaned and impoverished, he saw Jesus, and lifted them to their feet, giving them strength to march.

And when Dr. King saw angry tortured faces screaming at him and at little black children, saying they were nothing but dirt, he honored even those, as his sisters and brothers in Christ, and refused to hate them in return.

The Apostle Paul says in our reading today, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were

in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were tortured...Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for Christ has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

What will the little children remember? The little ones like Lucian, the little ones still inside each one of us here, no matter our age?

Over, and over, and over again, to all of us little ones, God had these words of assurance today, in every single scripture we read:

My children, says God to you, I understand what you need, and I yearn to give all of that to you.

I know that to live you need food and drink and love enough, every day.

From Jeremiah, in our opening words today, God says: when you were the ancient Hebrew peoples, wandering in the desert, I brought you into a plentiful land, so that you could eat its fruits and its good things. To you in a parched land, I was your "Fountain of living waters." *Jeremiah 2:7a, 13a*

In the psalm, God says I want to feed you with the finest wheat, to satisfy you with honey from the rock. *Psalms 81:16*

At the well at Samaria, Jesus tells the lonely woman, there all by herself, "If you drink the water I give, you will never be thirsty; my water will become in you a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life." *John 4:14*

And when there is a wedding feast, says God, I will invite in everyone, because that is what love does; I will always offer you my communion – my presence, my bread, my wine – strength and love - even if you can never repay me for my kindness. Because that is what forgiveness does.

I will give you enough, says God – food enough, drink enough, love enough – these things even overflowing, so you can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" *Hebrews 13:6*

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But we -- who have lived a few years longer than Lucian, who are not *really* children anymore, who have faced the pain and hardship and scarcity of this world – when we hear God's promises to give us what we need, food and drink, water unending, the finest wheat and honey....

We say, "Sure."

Sure --- we hope so, but....

Sure -- it would be nice to believe all that, like a little child. But we have an adult duty to protect Lucian, and ourselves. So before we get too carried away taking care of the strangers, we'll save up a little bit for a rainy day, for us and for our relatives.

And because God wants us -- you and me and Lucian -- at the banquet, too, that in and of itself isn't a problem at all. In God's Kingdom, when we invite in strangers, we get to stay and feast too. There is room for all of us.

But as time goes on, some of us begin to notice that it's been a very long time since there's been a stranger we cared for, and we find we've somehow slipped across the line and become a person who trusts far more in our own ability to put enough food and drink on the table than we trust God to do so.

This is my story, my struggle, too.

As time goes on, we find we're spending a little more time feasting with friends and family and business folks who can repay us, than we are coming to a place like this, to be reminded about the genuine source of everlasting water. We're spending more time feasting with those with whom we're comfortable, than we spend visiting a lonely one; or than we've ever spent in the local prison to visit a stranger, *who might just be an angel in our lives*, given to us by the God of odd promises.

For in God's odd and wondrous economy, love given away somehow comes back in multiples, a remarkable investment. The humble people at the bottom of the totem pole, who share what they have with others, feel like they're on top of the world, and those of us who haven't been able to stay free from the love of money remain hungry and thirsty and empty.

Then, when I listen the hardest, I hear priests and prophets speak of God's abundant care for us, not to chastise us into a harsh, obedient austerity, not to clip our wings and limit us, but so that we can finally experience what real flying is like, so that we can soar, really free, on the wings of love!

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What does any child remember? What did we all today pledge to share with Lucian?

The silver I inherited from my grandmother lay tarnished and forgotten, packed away a long time; her titles and positions of power were over, hidden from my view. But my grandmother's care for Pauline, and how she included me in that -- that's what I remember, a wonderful gift to me, as precious as unending water in a desert.

May God give us grace to receive love, here, today, so that we may share it with little ones like Lucian, and with strangers. Then, what a feast life will be for all of us!