

WELCOME TO PHILADELPHIA
Sermon for Pentecost 15C-Heb, 13:1-8, Lk 14: 1, 7-14
LPC, 8/26/16

When we lived near Washington, DC, residential neighborhoods cleared out on major holidays. When we moved to Woodsdale, just the opposite thing occurred. On major holidays streets in Woodsdale were solid with on-street parking, from family members returning to Wheeling to celebrate with their families.

This in fact is what I consider one of Wheeling's great strengths: the endurance and closeness of family ties. Family matters here. If you've grown up here you may not realize how remarkable that is. The strength of family ties you see around here is not universal, particularly in the hard-charging, professionally-oriented cities of the northeast United States, where very few people you meet are native to the area.

But no one can deny the unique adhesive qualities of family relationships over all other relationships. Splits between unrelated persons you can get over with relatively few regrets, but a family split hurts forever. Conversely, years of physical separation do not seem to weaken the connection we feel with family members. If one of us in trouble, we look after each other. When we say "Blood is thicker than water," we are not talking about the relative viscosity of different liquids.

Love within families takes different forms, of course. The relationship between husband and wife is particularly intimate and usually has a sexual dimension. The relationship between parent and child is not a relationship of equals, but is possibly the strongest known to nature. The relationship between siblings is frequently more complex, but is the closest to a relationship between equals in the nuclear family.

The Greek language of the New Testament had a different word for the classic form for each of these loves. The relationship between sexual partners is *eros*. The relationship between parent and child is *storge*. And the relationship between siblings is a word I'm sure you have heard before: *philadelphia*. There is also a fourth type of love in Greek: *agape*. *Agape* refers to a gentle, active, willful, selfless, kindness between persons. This is the type of love usually identified as "Christian love." *Agape* is what St. Paul wrote about in his first letter to the Corinthians: the "love is gentle, love is kind," passage we often hear at weddings.

However, the word in today's lesson from Hebrews is not *agape*. It is *philadelphia*, meaning fraternal or sibling love. Today's translation of *philadelphia* is "mutual love." This is not, to my mind, accurate. The King James Version, "brotherly love," is much closer to the apparent intent of the original. The New Revised Standard translators, in their zeal to remove gender-specific language, have shifted the meaning of the text.

"Mutual love" to me does not capture the deep and durable connection inherent in a blood relationship. Now, mind you, I am not saying that only brothers and sisters have relationships this deep and durable. All of us have or at least know of non-genetic relationships that have these qualities. We use the expression, "strong as blood," to refer to these relationships.

In fact, the ancient Greeks themselves did not restrict their use of the word *philadelphia* to physical families. As *Abarim*, a website I consulted specializing in translation of biblical words, points out, *philadelphia* is a compound of the words *philos*, meaning “love,” and *delphos*, meaning “brother” or “relative.” *Philos* means “a deliberately pursued synchronicity... not so much to do with feeling but with a state of alignment, co-existence, or even symbiosis.”

What all this word study boils down to is this: as Christians we are bidden to continue a very deliberate, interdependent relationship between people, as close as that between children of the same parents, as indeed we are under God. Experience tells us that it’s nice if this close, deliberate interdependent relationship is accompanied by warm feelings, but it doesn’t have to be. The important thing is that we realize that we are connected to one another, and act like it.

It is useful to approach today’s parable from Luke’s Gospel with this in mind. We are entering a section in Luke where Jesus tells a series of parables, many details of which are somewhat troubling. As a matter of fact, the entire theme for September’s Sunday lectionary might be Luke’s Troubling Parables. I’ll be alerting you to more of these troubling parabolic elements as we proceed through the coming weeks.

Today we have a story about taking the humble spots at a banquet, and inviting beggars to dinner instead of your family and friends. If you are able to take this admonitions literally, be my guest. But be aware that this teaching is not set up in the same way as, say, the Beatitudes, where Jesus is telling people specifically how to behave. Luke clearly identifies *this* passage as a parable. A parable by definition makes its point indirectly. So the main point that Jesus is trying to make here may not actually have a whole lot to do with dinner parties.

Another element in this and other problematic Lucan parables is something I’ve mentioned before: rabbinic hyperbole. This is the technical name given to a method of teaching employed by rabbis, whereby the point is dramatically overstated, to make sure that if your students only get a tiny little bit of what you’re talking about, they’ll get something. “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off,” is an example of this.

Jesus’ apparent directive to invite the destitute to your dinner parties is also, potentially, an example of this, although hospitality to the poor is definitely something to which we are literally to aspire. In the context of Jesus’ earlier pronouncement about giving up your place at the head table, however, Jesus seems to be making a point about being concerned with status and competition.

Human beings tend to want to get ahead of one another, to be counted as better than others. Even if we don’t act on these impulses, we may consciously or unconsciously look upon another of God’s children as inferior to ourselves. This could be as innocent as thinking, “I’m not as fat as she is,” or “Thank God I’m not *that* stupid.” But such thoughts are not innocent at all.

Jesus wants us to know we are all connected, and we are all equal before God. This is the nature of *philadelphia*. God loves us all. God loves no one of us better than another. Furthermore, we are all members of the same family. We bear responsibility for one another. We provide for one another in our abundance, and we depend upon each other in our need. We forgive each other for the sake of the family. We are all family. We are all blood.