



Sermon for the 12th Week of Pentecost, August 28, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Jeremiah 2:4-13](#)

[Psalms 81:1, 10-16](#)

[Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#)

[Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

I want to tell you a story today – a story from my own life. I was twenty, in college, and coming up on Spring Break. I had decided to take a driving trip. I was going to cross the Mississippi River – I know, this may not be a big thing to many of you, but it was a first in my lifetime to that point, coming from a family of East Coasters. The plan was to drive across Illinois from Wheaton in the Chicago area, cross the Mississippi south of the Quad Cities, drive along the River or as close to it as I could through Iowa and down into Missouri, wander around a bit staying off interstates, head across southern Illinois and Indiana, and then head back to school. The plan was to eat lightly, sleep under the stars or in the car at night (a Dodge Aspen wagon handed down from my parents that I named Francis), and just take the time to pray and reflect while seeing part of the country. I had invited a young woman art major, Jayne, who was working on some sensuous pottery forms for her final senior project to take the trip with me. Prayer and reflection might have turned to romance if she came on the trip, you know. Jayne thought about it for two days and then turned me down to keep working on her pieces.

Now, you should know that cars and I did not have the smoothest of relationships during those years. That's a story for another day.

Anyway – here I was, setting out on my adventure in Francis, to cross the mighty Mississippi. These were the days before college-age kids like myself had credit cards, and debit cards were not yet a thing. I took my checkbook and what I thought was a good amount of cash. I had given away my sleeping bags to someone who regularly took care of people in need. But I had a blanket printed to look like a Native American woven blanket, and it was springtime, for God's sake! I had some food with me and supplies for making a campfire.

You can feel where this is headed, right?

I drove happily westward along country roads, into the evening. I found one of the roads to pull over for the night, east of the Quad Cities, and settled in after a light meal for sleep in the car – because it was chilly.

It stayed chilly. It got chilly in the car. And that pseudo-Indian blanket did not do much to keep my body heat in. After a night that was colder than I had expected, the next morning as I set off I resolved the next night I might need to find a place where I could be inside.

My drive the next day across the mighty River and down along its western side was wonderful. I drove along a route numbered X-19, passing through rolling countryside and small townlets and state parklands. In the later afternoon, I drove into Burlington, this small city with steep hills up and down through its community along the River. I started driving around looking for churches where I could explain my situation and see if there might be anyone willing to let me shelter for the night. I pulled up alongside what looked like a promising Baptist Church on a hillside street, pressed on the brakes to slow to a park, and felt the brake pedal continue all the way to the floor. It was like the feeling of pressing fluid through a syringe, but with your foot. I quickly put on the parking brake and got out to look. Sure enough, there was my brake fluid oozing along the pavement.

I go into the church and explain my situation to the office manager. She contacts the pastor. She says that there is nothing they can do to help, but that there are some agencies in town that could help. I ask for the information. I ask about other churches in town, and she expresses skepticism that they would help. I then ask to use their yellow pages and phone to call auto places.

Down the steep hill was a Firestone that does brake work. They are still open.

I had set out on this trip wanting to spend some time in prayer. So, now, I'm praying! I start the car, turn around, and head down the hill, pressing on the brake with all my strength and using the parking brake to slow Francis down a bit. I cross through some intersections, I don't remember how, and I roll into the Firestone slowing enough to stop. Hallelujah. Thank you, God.

So, now the adventure began in a new way. I learned that not only had a brake fluid line busted loose, I learned that two of my brake pads are worn down and need replacement. This would cost all the cash I had, and Firestone did not accept checks. I told the mechanic my predicament, and he offered to replace one brake pad and the line for half the price. I accepted.

While waiting for the car to be repaired, I turned my attention to calling the agencies in town to see about any help for a place to stay for the night. One agency agreed to help me out and put me up in a small motel in town for the night. I thought about my limited funds to continue my trip, and thought I would need to wash dishes at a local restaurant.

Have any of you been in this kind of situation?

Plans for the trip shortened drastically. I mapped out a plan to drive home to central east Indiana, crossing the River immediately and heading east across mid-southern Illinois. I decided not to make the trip in a single day, as I was going to drive a bit slower on the way home and stay off the interstates while I had a partially fixed brake system.

I drove steadily. I was still enjoying the countryside and farmland, and I was spending some time in prayer and reflection. But my prayer and reflection carried a nagging concern now. I had another night to spend somewhere.

As sun was setting, I decided to get up my nerve and ask some folks along the road I was driving. I pulled into a farm that had a barn, and went to the door, rang the bell, and asked if it might be possible for me to pull my car into the barn for the night to sleep. The farmer couple said no, but guided me into town where there was a three-story building that used to be a boarding house. "And if not, you could ask at the county jail."

You see where this is going.

I left, and drove Francis into town without stopping at any other homes or farms to ask. I found the building, but it was no longer a boarding house. I didn't bother to ask at any churches – it was late enough in the evening, they were closed anyway.

So, I drove to the building in town that was the little county jailhouse. I went in and told the officers my situation. They said they could take me in and put me in a cell for the night. So, on this last night of my adventurous Spring Break journey, I slept on the top bunk in a jail cell, under sheets and blankets worn thin from use and with cigarette burn holes in a few places, above a man who came in every night on a DUI work-release sentence that allowed him to go to his job but then to return to jail for the duration of his

sentence. I also became familiar with using the stainless steel toilet there in the open in the cell. In the morning, the officer pushed a breakfast under the door for me – some corn flakes, a donut, and some juice and coffee. I was grateful for the hospitality. And I was grateful for the cell door sliding open so I could depart and get on my way home.

Now, why do I tell this story?

This experience put me in touch with what it is like to be in a situation that is becoming bit by bit more desperate. This experience put me in touch with what it is like to have to begin calculating how to make it through each day. This experience put me in touch with how important hospitality and kindness are – and how the fears and assumptions people carry can keep us from extending ourselves to help others. This experience put me in touch with the way that asking for help gets layered with shame.

You may remember those old social psychology experiments, where actors play a role of asking for help – either in a new higher-priced car or in an old beater, either dressed in fine business casual or business formal or in second-hand clothes that are tattered. You may recall the results – that people typically are more willing to help the individual who looks like someone from higher status than to help someone who looks poor. And you may remember why – people make quick judgments in their minds and hearts about people based on appearance and signals that give them a good guess about someone's social location, and then make further judgments about character. People more often make judgments about someone who looks poor to be less responsible, less honest, more likely to make poor life decisions because of character flaws, and more risky to form any relationship with.

This is how it was in Jesus' time, and in the time of the early Church. And this is how it is with us human beings through the ages.

Jesus said, when you throw a dinner party, don't just invite your friends and family and neighbors who are similar to or better off than you. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Invite people who cannot repay you with a similar feast or other favors. Invite simply because you can. And let your generosity pour out, simply because you can and you want to share. Let the moment be the moment – without hopes or ploys for favors your guests might give you in some future time. Let the gift be the gift – and give the gift of welcome hospitality and celebration specifically to folks who are in need.

From the book of Hebrews, we heard similarly to live with open hearts – with hearts and minds open very wide, to see each fellow human being as a possible heavenly messenger, to see ourselves in others' situations that they face – as we say in our baptismal promises, to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

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 being tortured.

Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled...

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.

I'm struck by how the author of Hebrews shows each act of generosity and kindness as something much larger than we imagine. We welcome strangers warmly, because we are opening doors to welcoming divine visitors. Heaven is touched by what we do. We remember and visit and pray for people in jails and prisons, and for anyone tortured or abused, very personally – as if we were with them and suffering what they

suffer. We are touched by any who suffer. There is a saying coming out of recent Hindu sages, "I am that," which means that each of us can see just how much like another person or creature we are, and that we are actually connected so that what another experiences, we also experience. This is what undergirds the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and it is at the heart of the Second Great Commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." I am that. I am that person. This is me. This also is Christ before me. And this is Christ within me, eager to deliver and heal and restore and lay out a feast. And, even greater and beyond our grasp, this is how Christ took upon himself the sin and suffering of all humankind, as God-with-us, fully human and fully divine, saying to each person in each moment through every span of history, "I am that."

What a radical openness! Heaven itself is opened, and we touch heaven in how we touch and care for others. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What if, indeed, what we do on earth is felt in heaven? What if, when we pray this, we are not only asking for God's action but calling on ourselves to live and act so that God's will is done on earth?

Fellow followers of Jesus, let our generosity flow. Let our doors open wide. Let us spread a feast, not for ourselves, but for those all around. There are the feasts not just of food but of our best efforts that we can offer. Can we open ourselves wide, like the gates and ladders of heaven, so that our lives can be touched and moved by others, and so that the loving care of God can flow through us?