

When I was in college, a friend who was a professional musician, and a few years older, started a band. He invited me to their first show, not expecting I would come, since the show was in New Orleans and I was in Philadelphia. He was overjoyed, and humbled, that one of our mutual friends and I would make the trip, just for him. But as we made plans, my heart turned in another direction, and to this day I am ashamed of myself. I started making demands. Requests, really, a spot on the guest list, a place to stay, little burdens that together revealed I had forgotten that the whole point of the trip was to support my friend. If I'd wanted to be self-absorbed, I could have done that alone, and saved the trouble of a long trip.

Looking back, I'm disappointed at how easily I became one of those hangers-on that you sometimes hear about, like the people who camped out in front of Graceland or asked Michael Jackson to pay their bills. Fortunately, my older and wiser traveling companion gently set me right. We paid our own way, stayed in a hotel, and would have paid at the door if we hadn't gotten there before they started charging. The show was awesome. We had a great time, and since I had walked back my thoughtless requests, we were also free from the burden of repayment that I naively invited. And our musician friend was even more generous to us than I had ever hoped, inviting us to a fine dinner that I never would have thought to ask for.

You have heard it said, "the best things in life are free," but I say to you, the best things in life do require us to give up other things. Everything good comes at a cost, often a cost more dear than mere money. If we deceive ourselves about this, we do ourselves a disservice. The things Jesus asks us to give up are often things our culture tells us are invaluable. But Christians know better, at least I hope we know better, because God has revealed a more excellent way. The culture tells us we should aspire to self-sufficiency and personal satisfaction, that we are entitled to convenience and control. But these things stand in the way of better things, like hospitality and community, things that give true joy.

So yes, it's true that God's grace is freely given. God's love is unconditional. But we have to accept them. Receiving the good things God gives to us requires our humility, our living sacrifice. Opening our hands to receive them might mean letting go of things we had been clinging to. Doing this takes courage, trust, and real faith.

We don't tend to think of it this way because we have been powerfully socialized to abide by certain social graces, but accepting hospitality requires humility. First, we have to admit that we are hungry, that our host has something to offer that we need. Second, we have to travel to our host, who hasn't necessarily chosen the banquet's location for our convenience. Third, we have to eat what's set before us. And fourth, yes, we have to discern our host's way of doing things, and show respect, and abide by the seating chart, even if we think it should be different. Those are real efforts, deserving praise.

When some Pharisees hosted Jesus, they were doing everything right, according

to the culture. But the lectionary skips over an incident that expands the meaning of the parable he told them. After Jesus arrived, but before he noticed the guests choosing the places of honor, he encountered a man who had no place at the table. He was suffering from edema, and Jesus healed him, and pointed out that although it was the sabbath, any one of them would rescue a child, or even an animal, that was in danger. But this doesn't just connect with last week's theme, it also sheds light on this week's. Because in Jesus's place and time, in both Jewish and pagan culture, the sick and the crippled were unwelcome, excluded from society and hospitality. You know, like now. The man Jesus healed had no place at the table at all, yet Jesus insists that he should have been invited. How rude!

Jesus is making a point, not just about etiquette, but about the kingdom of God. No one will be excluded, and those whom the culture dishonors may well receive places of greater honor than those whom it favors. But this is not an abstract or esoteric point. We can and should live according to God's principles right now. We should be falling over ourselves to extend grace and peace, love and hospitality, courtesy and honor, as widely and generously as we are able. When we do, we don't just help others, we make our own lives better, too. We find that we are happier and more satisfied than hoarding power and resources could ever make us.

Perhaps you have heard that the Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that God intends for all of us, where all are united in peace to God and to one another. If this is true, and I believe it is, what does that imply about the way we function as a worshipping community? Every Christian tradition wrestles with this question, though I believe our Anglican tradition keeps it especially close, as close as the book racks in the pews.

From the first, we have defined ourselves through our Book of Common Prayer, which is a synthesis of and, necessarily, a compromise between, diverse liturgical and theological principles, positions, and traditions. The genius of Common Prayer is that a fantastically diverse Christian community can unite, not in opinion, but in prayer, offering the same prayers honestly and often, enthusiastically. How else could we exist, but by embracing a whole set of compromises, and submitting to an order that none of us has made?

We know as well as anyone that the only way a worshipping community can even gather is by putting God and community ahead of personal satisfaction, by embracing the compromises that are necessary for all of us to gather and worship together, rather than grumbling about them and angling to get our own way. This goes for me too, especially for me, as I try continually to broker the compromise that is our worship and our community. And while I could contradict the very point of this sermon by making demands, or complaining about complaints, I would rather give praise to all of you, for the effort you make every Sunday.

Each of you comes to a church you didn't design at an hour that you might not

have chosen, hears readings you didn't pick, prays prayers you might not have written, or written that way, recites a creed with tenets you may doubt, prays for people you don't know, or don't like, and some of you even make the ultimate sacrifice, singing music that "everybody" doesn't know. God love you! I love you! You do it! You do it anyway, because it's worth doing! You receive more than you give up! You make something wonderful and amazing happen! You create a Christian community through compromise, which is nothing less than sacrificing some of yourself. By opening your hands, you receive a foretaste of heaven on earth.

By knowing Jesus and living according to his teachings, you know better than the world: you know that being with Jesus is better than staying home, you know that holy community gives you more joy than getting everything on your wish list. You know that loving God, loving one another, loving your neighbor, is the only way through this life that truly satisfies the longing of our hearts and souls. So don't stop trying to make our worship the best it possibly can be. Don't stop loving your neighbor, and considering what your neighbor might need. For God's banquet is meant to sustain all of us, and it is greater and richer than any we could demand. By compromising on ourselves, we discover that God never compromises on love.