

Sermon delivered by Katie Sherrod at the meeting of the Executive Council meeting in Fort Worth

February 16, 2011

Sirach 34:14-19

Psalm 94:2-15

Romans 14:10-13

Luke 14:15-24

When I made my first trip to Israel with Gayland soon after we were married, I was immediately struck by two things:

One was how scripture and geography slammed together for me – as we drove “up to Jerusalem” from the Tel Aviv Airport, we came over a rise and saw above us the white stones of Jerusalem shining in the light of an enormous full moon.

It was indeed a shining city on a hill.

The other was how much it all looked like West Texas.

There was the same rugged landscape, the same scrubby brush, the same austere beauty, even, I would swear, the same sheep. As a West Texas girl, it made me feel a new identification with the folks I met in scripture.

So when we read in Sirach:

. . . The eyes of the LORD are upon those who love him; he is their mighty shield and strong support, A shelter from the heat, a shade from the noonday sun, a guard against stumbling, a help against falling . . .

let me tell you, having grown up where it can be 110 in the shade, I know how lovely is a shelter from the heat, a shade from the noonday sun, a guard against stumbling in a rugged desert land, where the heat can kill you and a fall can bring you face to face with a scorpion or an angry rattlesnake.

And as for Romans --

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

When your nearest neighbor is 60 or more miles away on the next ranch, you aren't much into judging them or making things harder for them. The big spaces of West Texas and its sparse population have bred into the people there an abiding faith in the vastness of God's mercy, a deep-seated pragmatism about the nature of humanity, and an innate sense of justice.

Yes, they are for the most part a conservative bunch, but it is the conservatism of those who work the land, not the pinched conservatism of those who worry that there's not enough to go around – not enough money, not enough food, most of all, not enough of God's love. That last is the worse, of course, because if you think there are limits to God's love, you have to work very hard at keeping out all those other people who might get your share.

West Texans learned long ago – they had to survive – that there will be enough for everyone if we share, IF we pool resources, IF we help one another out, IF we respond when others call us for help. Because when we need help, it doesn't matter if your neighbor is black or brown, or gay, or an illegal worker, or even a Baptist. What matters is that they show up, and help.

And as for turning out for the feast -- you can count on West Texans to not only show up but to bring spit-roasted cabrito, cole slaw, potato salad, tamales, rice and beans, and gallons of iced tea, sweetened and unsweetened.

In Iraan, the tiny town in which I grew up, every mom in town knew the names of every kid in town AND that of their dog. In the summers my brothers and I would run out of the house in the morning – with mom yelling after us – “Did you grow up in a barn? Shut the door!” -- and be gone until we were called in for the evening meal.

We'd ride our bikes, go swimming in the Pecos River – when there was water in it -- play sandlot ball – we'd surge from one end of the little town to another and up to the hills outside of town. Sometimes all us kids might wash up at our house for lunch, or at someone else's house. Wherever we ended up, the mom of the house would feed us all. Without question, every kid was welcomed, every kid was fed – and the dogs were given water and a treat.

These good women, most of whom were hard shelled Baptists who had more than a faint distrust of the four Sherrod kids' Catholic faith. But they never discriminated when it came to feeding us. We were kids, we were hungry, we were welcome.

These same good women would turn out for dinners at the local community center even when they were sponsored by the Catholics. They knew one might turn down such an invitation only if you were on your death bed. If you didn't show up more than once, you risked finding yourself left out of other community events. These folks know the value of relationships. Showing up to show support for one another means a LOT in these small towns.

These experiences taught me more about welcoming folks to the feast than almost anything else in my life and have served me well in recent years.

It is very meet and right that these readings should arrive on our calendars as we do our work here in the Diocese of Fort Worth, for they speak to the survival tools we have used through the last few years, especially the last two

years when Episcopalians have been split one from the other by decisions made by our former leaders. And believe me, there were days when it looked darker than midnight under a skillet.

Faced with the loss of sisters and brothers and of beloved church homes, we turned to God and to each other.

We have prayed together, played together and shared meals – at THIS table and at many many other shared tables – at pot lucks, and diocesan picnics, at Lenten suppers, at meals in each other's homes, gardens, barns, and backyards.

These readings speak of the food that has sustained us – the grace, shield and hope of God's unlimited love, the delight of inviting others to the feast to which we've been invited, the challenge of creating a healthy welcoming diocese out of the remnants of a diocese founded in anger and fed on dissatisfaction, dysfunction and disinformation.

Most of all they speak to the job that faces not just us in this diocese, but all of us on this Council – that of reconciliation and renewal.

How do we in this diocese welcome back those who sat in silence while many of us were called terrible names, subjected to public shaming, asked – or told – to leave our church homes because we are “not real Christians?”

Believe me, while our heads may agree with our bishop that we should offer them prodigious welcome, still raw broken hearts aren't so sure. I suspect that's the case with some in this room too.

How do all of us reach out to those who reject the invitation to the feast, who indeed claim that the feast is poisoned – not just here in this diocese but in the wider communion?

Well, one thing's for sure. We can't do it on our own. As the people of West Texas know so well, we will only do it with God's help and that of one another.

We will do it by remembering what we heard today – that they *who fear the LORD are never alarmed, never afraid; for the LORD is their hope.*

We will do it by remembering that *we are not to judge our brother or sister. Or treat them with contempt.*

We will do it – as Bishop Katharine said last night – by turning to one another as the beloved.

Most of all we do it by reminding ourselves and them of God's unlimited love to which all are welcome and of which all are invited to partake.

For Bishop Ohl is right -- we must offer them prodigious welcome, as God has prodigiously welcomed us so often in our own lives.

Amen.