the fires of anti-Judaism. At the same time, the text says that the woman ("a daughter of Abraham") praises God for her healing (13:13) and the crowds rejoice at the wonderful things Jesus is doing (13:17). Rather than a judgment on Israel, the story becomes a fulfillment of the prediction that Jesus brings division (12:49–53), a phenomenon all too modern, when the present is discerned as a time for repentance.

PROPER 17

Ordinary Time 22

Sunday between August 28 and September 3 inclusive

The admonition in Heb. 13:2 "to show hospitality to strangers" is vividly illustrated by the advice that Jesus gives to guests and hosts in Luke 14:7–14. The advice to guests leads up to the revolutionary saying in v. 11. As the commentary on today's Gospel suggests, the saying is a summary of the way God works; the effects are profound—"a world is overturned."

In the topsy-turvy world of divine hospitality, everybody is family. The strangers whom Jesus tells us to invite to our parties are not just any strangers; they are those who in Jesus' day were considered unclean and undesirable, and they will never be able to reciprocate. This kind of radical hospitality makes sense only in light of the conviction that God rules the world and therefore that adequate repayment for our efforts is simply our relatedness to God and our conformity to what God intends (Luke 14:14; Heb. 13:5–6). Both Heb. 13 and Luke 14:7–14 are calls to commitment to God's reign rather than to the ways of the world.

Both Jer. 2:4–13 and Ps. 81 also call the people of God back to commitment to God alone, rather than to the gods of the nations and their values (see Ps. 81:8–9; Jer. 2:11). Both texts portray God recalling God's gracious guidance of the people in the past and lamenting their present unfaithfulness. The call to commitment that is implicit in Jer. 2:4–13 is explicit in Ps. 81:8, "O Israel, if you would but listen to me!"

In our day, God is no doubt still lamenting our failure to listen, but is also, no doubt, still inviting us to take our humble place at a table that promises exaltation on a scale that the world cannot even imagine.

Jeremiah 2:4–13

God's people, having been the recipients of a unique relationship with their Creator, have rejected both the relationship and the One

who extended it to them. Such is the thrust of the present text, in which the Lord is portrayed as not only deeply pained over the defection of Israel, but at something of a loss to understand it. The setting is a court of law (compare, for example, Micah 6:1–5), a place which with Jeremiah, as a member of a priestly family, was perhaps familiar, since the role of the priests was sometimes judicial as well as liturgical. The sum of the passage, therefore, is an indictment of Israel before the bar of justice.

After an introductory sentence (v. 4) the text proper begins with a haunting question put by Yahweh: "What wrong did your ancestors find in me, that they went far from me?" Just as Yahweh's love of the people has an ancient history, so has the people's rejection, for it is not just the present generation that will have nothing to do with Yahweh, but "your ancestors," as well. In a manner similar to that of Hosea (Hos. 11:1–4), Jeremiah regards the period of the exodus from Egypt and the wanderings in the wilderness as a time of Yahweh's greatest intimacy with the nation. Yet not even the One who "brought us up from the land of Egypt" is the object of the people's devotion. Emphasis in the text is on the terrors from which Yahweh has saved Israel, "deserts and pits," "drought and deep darkness" (Jer. 2:6), and on their opposites, those creature comforts which possession of the Land of Yahweh's Promise has yielded: "a plentiful land," "its fruits and its good things" (v. 7).

Yet not even this land, the object of their wanderings, has prompted the people to an appreciation of Yahweh's grace: for "when you entered you defiled my land."

In v. 8 the focus of attention shifts from the past to the present, and the failure of the ancestors is repeated by those in authority in that they too neglect to search out Yahweh and Yahweh's ways. (Notice how the question that the ancestors should have asked, but did not, is also missing from the lips of the leaders of the people: "Where is the LORD?" vs. 6, 8.) Four categories of leaders are identified: priests, law handlers (that is, interpreters of Torah), rulers, and prophets, and in its own way each group has prostituted its office. (The wordplay that NRSV produces in v. 8, "prophets . . . profit," is clever, but does not reflect a similar wordplay in the Hebrew.) It would doubtless be incorrect to conclude that Jeremiah sees evil only in the nation's leaders, for the people as a whole have sinned ("your children's children" of v. 9). Rather, the leaders of the people are singled out for dishonorable mention because they, above all, should know better.

The accusation is formalized in v. 9 with the use (twice) of the Hebrew word *rîb*, meaning "to file a lawsuit." Witnesses are summoned (v. 10) and urged to search from west to east ("Cyprus" to "Kedar") for precedents: nations simply do not change their gods. Yet Israel has done this unheard-of thing. The "glory" (v. 11) that Israel has exchanged for "something that does not profit" (an echo of v. 8) is a reference to the active, gracious presence of Yahweh. For it was the "glory" of Yahweh that guided the people through the dangers of the wilderness and that appeared to the children of Israel as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day (note Ex. 40:34–38). The created order itself stands amazed at the magnitude of Israel's folly, for while creation knows its master, Israel apparently does not.

The error of the people is twofold, in that they have turned their backs on Yahweh, the God who has loved and called them in special ways, while they have lavished their affection on gods who are not God. They have substituted flawed cisterns for "living water" (Jer. 2:13).

A number of scholars maintain that there is a rough chronological sequence to the passages in the book of Jeremiah and, if that is so, it is quite likely that this passage comes from the early days of Jeremiah's active ministry, and therefore reflects those conditions of spiritual syncretism which Josiah inherited from his predecessor and father, Amon (2 Kings 21:19–26). It was this participation in the worship of alien deities that Josiah targeted in his reforms. It is interesting to speculate that Jeremiah's preaching may have helped to stiffen Josiah's backbone in this regard, but as Josiah seems to have taken no notice of Jeremiah—at least as far as 2 Kings is aware (note 2 Kings 22:14–20)—that possibility is remote.

Yet these words served notice on all who would listen that Yahweh, God of Israel, would brook no competition in the loyalty of the people. While the culture of ancient Israel is light years away from that of our own time, it is still a reality that God demands loyalty and love from the people of God (note Mark 12:30 and parallels). And it is still a reality, in this age when some people, at least, clamor that all the visible, public symbols of religion should stay in place, that justice and compassion still constitute the true worship of the God of Israel, the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Justice and compassion, more than prayers in visible places, constitute the calling of Israel and of the church (compare Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8).

Psalm 81:1, 10–16

Like Ps. 50 for Proper 14, Ps. 81 can be considered an example of a "liturgical sermon," in which the preacher speaks on behalf of God

(compare vs. 6–16 with Ps. 50:7–23). Like that in Ps. 50, the sermon in Ps. 81 has two parts (vs. 6–10 and 11–16), preceded by an introduction. Whereas the introduction in Ps. 50 imaginatively portrayed the convening of a court with Yahweh as judge, the introduction in Ps. 81 involves the beginning of a festal celebration. Indeed, it is possible that the sermon was preached originally on one of Israel's holy days. Joyous praise accompanies the beginning of the festival (vs. 1–2), which is marked by blowing "the trumpet at the new moon" (v. 3). This practice accords with the description in Lev. 23:23–24 and Num. 29:1–6 of the observance of the first day of the seventh month (sometimes called the Festival of Trumpets). The conviction of the people for their faithlessness would also be appropriate for the Day of Atonement (see 81:11), and the recollection of the Decalogue (see especially 81:10ab) and the harvest theme (81:10c, 16) would be appropriate for the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. Both of these observances were also in the seventh month (see Lev. 23:26–36; Num. 29:7–39), so perhaps Ps. 81 was originally related to this festal season. Regardless of its original setting, however, Ps. 81 functions as a call to commitment in all times and places. Although the lection omits most of the introduction and first section of the sermon, we shall examine them in order to set the context for hearing vs. 10–16.

Psalm 81 begins like a song of praise. People are invited to "sing aloud" (see Pss. 145:7; 5:11; 67:4; 96:12; 149:5, NRSV "sing for joy"; 95:1; 98:4, NRSV "joyous song"), "shout for joy" (see Pss. 95:1–2; 98:4, 6; 100:1, NRSV "make a joyful noise"), and "raise a song" (the Hebrew root occurs in Ex. 15:2; Pss. 33:2; 47:6–7; 95:2; 98:4–5, for example), with a variety of instrumental accompaniment (see Ex. 15:20; 2 Sam. 6:5; Pss. 149:3; 150:3–5). Beyond the fact that such joyous praise is appropriate for a festival, it should be noted that the same invitations occur frequently in contexts that make explicit what is really being celebrated—the reign of God over all peoples and things. For instance, of the psalms cited above, Pss. 5, 47, 95, 96, 98, 145, and 149 either contain the exclamation "The LORD is King!" (Ps. 96:10) or otherwise address the Lord as "king" (Pss. 5:2; 47:2, 7, 8; 95:3; 98:6; 145:1; 149:2). Furthermore, the song of praise in Ex. 15 culminates in the affirmation that "the LORD will *reign* forever and ever" (emphasis added), and 2 Sam. 6:2 suggests that God is "*enthroned* on the cherubim" (emphasis added). The invitations in Ps. 81:1–2 to celebrate Yahweh's sovereignty anticipate what will be the main theme of the sermon that follows—namely, only Yahweh is God (see especially vs. 9–10).

Verse 5c is problematic, but it should probably be understood as the preacher's claim that he or she will be delivering *God's* word rather than his or her own words. It may be similar to the contemporary "Listen for the Word of God." In any case, it is God who speaks in the first person in the remainder of the psalm, first reminding the people of the gracious deliverance from the burden of bondage in Egypt (vs. 6–7a; the word translated "burden" occurs in Ex. 1:11; 2:11; 5:4–5; 6:6), and then perhaps of further gracious dealings in the wilderness (Ps. 81:7c; God seems here to be giving Israel the benefit of the doubt, for Meribah is remembered elsewhere as a place where *Israel tested God:* see Ex. 17:7; Ps. 95:8). Psalm 81:7b may be an allusion to Sinai, if the phrase "secret place of thunder" is meant to refer to a cloud (see Ex. 19:16). In any case, an allusion to Sinai would be an appropriate anticipation of the clear recollection of the Decalogue in Ps. 81:9–10. Verse 10 is almost identical to the prologue of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6), and Ps. 81:9 is another way of formulating the First Commandment—"no other gods" (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7; see also Jer. 2:4–13, the Old Testament lesson for the day).

At the heart of the first section of the sermon is the expression of God's desire that the people "Hear"—"listen to me!" (Ps. 81:8; the same Hebrew word lies behind both "hear" and "listen"). God had "heard" the people in Egypt (Ex. 3:7), and it seems only reasonable that they now "hear" God. Abundance awaits their hearing (Ps. 81:10c). The choice is theirs.

The second part of the sermon (vs. 11–16) begins by stating the people's choice (v. 11) and its consequence (v. 12). They "did not listen." God's response is to let the people have exactly what they chose—their own "stubborn hearts" and "their own counsels" (see Jer. 7:24, where both words also occur in the context of the prophet's accusation that the people "go after other gods" and "did not listen to me"; see vs. 6, 26). In effect, God's will to "fill" (Ps. 81:10c) and "satisfy" (v. 16) is thwarted by the people's refusal to "open" (v. 10c) themselves to God's gracious presence and action (see Rom. 1:24–25). Like a rejected lover, God's pain is evident. Verse 13 of Ps. 81 urgently repeats the desire God expressed in v. 8; the word "hear"/"listen" occurs for the fourth time in the sermon. The setbacks the people have apparently experienced (note "enemies" and "foes" in v. 14) are not the result of God's will, but rather a result of the people's own choice. God wills abundant life—not just manna as in the wilderness, but the "finest of the wheat" (v. 16; see Ps. 147:14; see also the hymn "You Satisfy the Hungry Heart," by Omer Westendorf, in *The Presbyterian Hymnal;* Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, no. 521), and not just water from the rock as at Meribah (Ex. 17:6–7), but honey (see Deut. 32:13–14). O that the people would listen!

The admonition to "listen" to God calls to mind the story of Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:1–8). In a context that, like Ps. 81, recalls Sinai (note the "mountain" in v. 2, the presence of Moses, the cloud in v. 7), the divine voice identifies Jesus as "my Son," the bearer of the divine will, and says, "*Listen* to him!" (v. 7, emphasis added). What Jesus proclaimed was the reign of God, and he invited people to enter it (Mark 1:14–15). In our time and place, we are perhaps more bombarded by competing voices than any generation in the history of the world—newspapers, radio, TV, all vying for our attention and allegiance. In this din of competing voices, Ps. 81 calls us to discern the pained but persistent voice of the One who says simply, "Follow me" (Mark 1:17; compare Ps. 81:13b, John 10:4).

Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16

This lection opens with a series of traditional ethical admonitions (Heb. 13:1–7) that would have been equally at home in the moral writings of Hellenistic Judaism or the larger Greco-Roman world. It is difficult to detect an order to the admonitions or any overarching theme, although perhaps vs. 15–16 provide that theme (see the discussion below). Several of the admonitions are followed by statements of justification drawn either from experience or from the divine will (for example, v. 4b).

Although 13:1 appears to follow abruptly on 12:29, two features of the verse connect it closely to the preceding section. First, the verb "continue" translates the same Greek verb that appears in v. 27 as "remain" *(menein)*. Among the things that must continue or remain is "mutual love" *(philadelphia)*. Second, this admonition to mutual love recalls the earlier admonition to "pursue peace with everyone" (12:14). The expectation that love should characterize life within the Christian community appears in several strands of New Testament writings (for example, Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7), but the admonition that follows in Heb. 13:2 may caution against understanding this circle of love too narrowly. If Christians love one another, surely that love spills over into their treatment of others.

The admonition "not [to] neglect to show hospitality to strangers" sounds a bit grudging to modern ears, in which a more positive formulation would be welcome. Rhetorically, however, the saying functions to emphasize the importance of hospitality. In other words, not to neglect hospitality is to make certain that it is carried out. Here a justification accompanies the admonition: "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." This allusion to the scriptural stories of Abraham, Lot, and Gideon serves to remind readers of the importance of welcoming those beyond the confines of the community.

The next admonition, that concerning those who are imprisoned or undergoing torture, recalls 10:32–36. Hebrews' own audience has experienced such persecution and has already participated in ministry with those who are in prison. As the recipients of persecution, Christians have a heightened sensitivity to the situation of others.

The reminder about the importance of faithfulness in marriage (13:4) is accompanied by another statement of justification, this time framed as a warning about divine judgment. The admonition to be on guard about the love of money is likewise accompanied by a statement about God's will, although here it is stated positively. Human beings have no need to rely on money as a means of security, for God "will never leave you or forsake you." Verse 6 amplifies this assurance about divine protection, an assurance that may reach back to include all the preceding admonitions.

The demand for remembering leaders of the Christian community in v. 7 continues this list of ethical demands, but here the discourse shifts. Following v. 7, a long section of theological justification ties warnings about behavior to the sacrifice of Jesus himself. This culminates in v. 17, with its renewed demand that Christians obey the leaders of the church.

Verse 8, one of the most familiar lines of Hebrews, stands out from its context. Literally, nothing connects it with what precedes or follows. Theologically, however, this claim is very much at the heart of Hebrews' understanding of Christology. The book opens with the assertion that "you are the same, and your years will never end" (1:12). More important in this context, the claim about the unchanging nature of Jesus Christ grounds the surrounding ethical instruction, for it is Christ who enables and demands responsible Christian living.

The author returns to this point, although indirectly, in 13:15–16: "Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise." The sacrificial language here draws directly on the preceding verses, in which Hebrews makes a final appeal to the sacrifice of Jesus himself.

This "sacrifice of praise" recalls what Leviticus refers to as the "sacrifice of the offering of well-being" (Lev. 7:11–18). In the psalms, this sacrifice serves as a figurative reference to prayer or other liturgical statements of praise (Pss. 50:14, 23; 107:22). Hebrews includes this element of verbal praise ("the fruit of lips that confess

his name"), but clearly the "sacrifice of praise" includes one's behavior. As for Paul in Rom. 12:1–2, Hebrews applies this liturgical language to human life, all of which should be understood as a "sacrifice of praise." The end of Heb. 12 again enters into view, with its assumption that acceptable worship includes acceptable living.

Much in the vocabulary and style of Hebrews seems alien to contemporary Christians. Perhaps at this point as much as anywhere else, the distance that separates Hebrews from us is profoundly substantive rather than stylistic, however. Here Hebrews challenges our understanding of Christian life, for much within contemporary Christianity wishes to divide ethics from worship and worship from ethics. Congregations and individuals implicitly, sometimes explicitly, identify themselves with one emphasis or the other, as if they were alternative approaches to being Christian. The author of Hebrews radically connects the two, however, understanding that behavior does (or does not) reflect praise of God, and praise of God requires behavior consistent with that praise.

Luke 14:1, 7–14

The Gospel readings from Luke for today and next Sunday come from the critical fourteenth chapter, where much of the action and teaching is set on the Sabbath in the house of a leader of the Pharisees. As if that setting were not enough to make readers anticipate conflict, the narrator adds that the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely (14:1). As the various incidents unfold, it turns out, however, that Jesus is really the aggressor—the one who challenges the lawyers and Pharisees (v. 3), who repudiates the guests who jockey for the "first couches" at the meal (v. 7), who instructs the host whom to invite to his next meals (vs. 12–14). By both ancient and modern standards, Jesus might be called a rude guest. The wary Pharisees are reduced to silence.

One can hardly overstate the importance of the meal as the setting for this section. Eating is essential for life; no one can manage for very long without it. But a dinner with guests is an occasion of social importance, to which people of one's class are invited and where there is an implied sharing of values and ideas. The status and rank of individuals are legitimated by their inclusion in the guest list and their location on the seating chart. For readers of Luke's narrative, meals are also symbols for the inbreaking and anticipated rule of God. In 13:29 we hear of people coming from east and west, north

and south, to "eat in the kingdom of God." The Lord's table becomes a foretaste of the eschatological banquet (22:14–20).

There are four incidents that occur at this particular meal in the house of the leader of the Pharisees: Jesus' healing of the man with dropsy (14:2–6), his counsel about finding a place at the table (vs. 7–11), his instructions about what guests to invite (vs. 12–14), and the parable of the great dinner (vs. 15–24). The assigned lection focuses only on the two middle sections.

Jesus' warning about striving for a prominent seat and risking humiliation by being sent to a lower seat seems at first blush like no more than a piece of common sense, down-home wisdom. In fact, it can be paralleled by a variety of texts in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. There is nothing particularly distinctive about Jesus' counsel—until one reaches 14:11: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The saying is what the literary critics call a polar reversal. It is not just that the exalted will be humbled; we know about that from the story of Job. Nor is it simply that the humble will be exalted; we know about that from the story of Joseph. This is a complete reversal in which those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. When the north pole becomes the south pole and the south pole becomes the north pole, a world is overturned.

What starts out in the narrative as a breach of etiquette for a number of guests ends up with a prediction about a radical change. The passive voice of the two main verbs in v. 11 suggests that God is the real actor, the one who humbles the pretentious and exalts the humble. God is at the root of this polar reversal, a theme Luke will not let the readers forget (for example, 1:51–53; 6:20–26; 13:30).

The second section (14:12–14) spells out one of the revolutionary features of God's polar reversal. A guest list is usually composed of those closest to the host or hostess—relatives, friends, and rich neighbors—and it tends to foster a cycle of reciprocity. Hospitality takes on a self-serving purpose. Jesus abruptly proposes inviting a different group to the next "power lunch"—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. These are not only beyond the usual categories of family, friends, and rich neighbors; they are by Jewish law unclean.

The host is being urged to cross a big boundary and offer hospitality that cannot be repaid, at least in this life. As one writer puts it, "Jesus urges a social system without reciprocity" (Halvor

Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel;* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, p. 132). Through such activity these marginalized people become members of the group. Symbolically they are no longer outside the circle of power.

But why the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? In the upcoming parable, they are the outsiders who end up being the insiders at the great dinner (14:21). They seem to be Jesus' favorites, his kind of people. They are those for whom he came (4:18–19). Because he likes them, his disciples cannot ignore them.

There is no doubt that Jesus is a disturbing, even rude, guest at this dinner party, upsetting standard protocol, but his presence and his words open the way for the transformed structures of the kingdom of God.

Proper 18

Ordinary Time 23

Sunday between September 4 and 10 inclusive

While each of the lessons has its own distinctive emphases, there are some common threads among them. Most prominent in the Gospel lesson is the theme of the cost of discipleship. One of the costs involves family, but the implication is that there are compensations as well as costs—in this case, the promise of a "new surrogate family" (see commentary on the Gospel lesson). In short, belonging to God affects the way in which one belongs to others. Traditional patterns, kinship and otherwise, are transformed.

It is this insight that lies at the heart of Paul's letter to Philemon concerning Philemon's slave, Onesimus. Without directly requesting that Philemon set Onesimus free, Paul clearly suggests that the ties that bind persons as brothers and sisters in Christ transform traditional social patterns, including slavery (see vs. 15–16). In short, belonging to God affects the way in which we belong to others.

While family or social patterns are not as clearly in view in Jer. 18 and Ps. 139, both texts do affirm our belongingness to God, individually and corporately. Psalm 139 is a marvelous affirmation that we are known by God. Such knowledge connotes intimate and inextricable relationship—we belong to God. While Ps. 139 speaks in terms of individuals, Jer. 18:1–11 has the whole people in view. As clay in the hands of the divine potter, we may be reshaped by God but never simply abandoned. We belong to God, and as both Jer. 18:11 and the New Testament lessons remind us, it is precisely this good news that calls us to a repentance that affects our relatedness to others in every sphere of life—familial, social, political, economic, and otherwise.

Jeremiah 18:1–11

It is clear from the biblical record that the prophets of ancient Israel often responded to the sights and sounds of the world around