From 1930 to 1932, a social psychologist by the name of Richard LaPiere travelled through the United States accompanied by a young Chinese student and his wife. During this trip they visited a large number of restaurants, cafes, hotels and motels (251 establishments in all). Of these 251 visits they were refused service only once. Generally speaking when they received any additional attention it was ‘generally positive’. Six months after the completion of this very epic trip, LaPiere sent a questionnaire to all of the establishments they had visited. Included in this questionnaire was the question, ‘will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?’ He obtained 128 replies. Of these replies 92 per cent of the restaurants and 91 per cent of the hotels/motels reported that they would not accept Chinese customers. Of the remaining eight or nine percent who did not refuse outright they stated that they were uncertain whether or not they would.

Okay so you may be asking what my point is with this introduction, well for that you need to wait a minute. First let’s ask what we are to conclude from such a study. I guess you can reach your own conclusions but for this sermon the conclusion that I am going to reach has to do with the difference in dealing with people in the abstract and dealing with people in the flesh. When the hypothetical Chinese guests were mentioned in the letter most people had no problem saying that they would not serve them, but when confronted with actual Chinese people there was no rejection and, in fact, people tended to treat them warmly.

 And if this is the case we should ask what this means in terms of where we are in today in our society and whether this ability to deal with people in the abstract has grown or shrunk. What I mean by this are there more opportunities to act in the way that the respondents did to Richard LaPiere’s survey? And I would say yes. In the 1930’s to do such a thing you had to put together a survey, mail it and then wait for a mailed response. This took some effort and a fair amount of time, but in our day and age to deal with someone in the abstract we just need to look at our phones. I mean in a few clicks I can tell any number of people I have never met how much I hate them. So much more of our communication with the outside world is done in a way that eliminates an actual person standing in front of us from the equation. When we post something on social media or comment on an article we never have to interact face to face. Think about how strange it would have been twenty years ago if you carried around a picture of yourself in your wallet or purse and every time you ran into someone you told them to not look at you but rather at this photo which you called your profile picture. Or what if after you demanded that they looked at your profile picture you made them look at pictures of your kids eating ice cream or read them a screed of your chosen political position. You would not have many friends I am guessing. But that is what we do on a fairly regular basis these days. We have greatly increased the number of detached interactions and I believe as a result we have increased the amount of acrimony in the world. Just like the difference between the real people who went to the restaurants and hotels and the abstract people of the survey.

So with that out of the way we can finally get to our readings and see if I can make them relate to my introduction. The first one I want to look at comes from Galatians, and says, “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” Basically Paul is saying that when we interact with someone who has done something wrong we are supposed to do it with gentleness. And sadly I am not sure if gentle is in our modern vocabulary when dealing with others with whom we find something wrong. I did not watch the recent Democratic Party debate, partly because I didn’t think I could keep twenty people straight but mainly because I tire of the modern style of debate, be it Democrat, Republican or Maoist. It is not about ideas but rather about who can land the best shot and the shot is generally defined as a short pronouncement, which humiliates and exposes the person at whom it was aimed. And the sad thing is it must work because people keep doing it. People watch political debates and for that matter political shows in general in much the same way that they watch WrestleMania. We are not concerned about the person with whom we disagree so there is no need to be gentle. But part of the reason that Paul tells us to be gentle is because of what we are dealing with when we encounter one another. C.S. Lewis stated in his book *The Weight of Glory*, “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses." Even those with whom we disagree are created in God’s image and so gentleness is the proper posture. Because when we treat others with disdain we are in a sense treating God with disdain. I mean if God is perfect and he puts up with us how can we imperfect people refuse to treat others with dignity and respect and yes, gentleness. As the author of Hebrews tells us, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The second reading that I want to look at comes from the Gospel and it says, “The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.” The lesson from this is pretty straight forward but bears repeating and that is when we interact with people, we should, whenever possible, do it face to face. Yes, Jesus sent people ahead of him, but he went also. He dealt with people one on one, not through mediators, editorials in the newspaper or through tweets at 2:00 in the morning. I think our world would be a much happier place if we did most of our interacting with people in a one on one environment.

There are lots of theories that go around about what is wrong with the world these days and one of the ones that I find quite intriguing has to do with how people seek out meaning. The theory basically says that people are abandoning their local communities and seeking meaning in far-flung locations. Much of this has taken the form of national politics as a means to salvation or finding a group of like-minded people on the internet. In practicality what ends up happening is people are less involved with their neighbors and communities. This was most famously diagnosed in Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone*. The books title came from the statistic that from 1980 to 2000 the number of people who went bowling increased while the number of people who participated in bowling leagues dramatically decreased. He links this disconnectedness to declines in both our physical and civic health. We deal with each other at a distance, but as Jesus shows today you can’t do this, you have to actually show up and deal with people.

I obviously do not have the prescription to fix everything that is wrong with our society today, but I think following these two relatively simple ideas as presented in this morning’s lesson could go a long way. In our mad rush towards technological connectedness we have lost real connectedness. We have lost our ability to deal with people and all of their faults with grace, humility and gentleness. We ignore our actual neighbors so that we can be mad at someone in Washington, Caracas or Moscow. We just celebrated the Fourth of July and the freedom entailed therein. And we are free to chose how we want to live our lives. I would suggest that we chose to follow the examples given to us today -- to engage with actual people and to deal with them gently. It may not seem like much but I think it could go a long way towards healing the acrimony that we see played out on a daily basis so that we may be God’s own both now and forevermore.