

Recovering and Reclaiming Gospel Hospitality

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Holy God, by your Spirit, break down the barriers that keep us from hearing your voice. Free us from that which is holding us back from following Jesus. Enlighten this reading of your word that we might be changed by it. Amen.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This week several of us on staff - Sarah, Sean, Kristie and I - attended a community gathering, hosted by First Pres Deerfield, on creating a culture of non-violence. Some of you attended a similar gathering at Gorton the next evening, that one on politics and gun legislation. The violence in our culture is on our minds. Hardly a day goes by when we are not reminded of it.

I arrived at the gathering in Deerfield thinking about gun violence, but the speakers quickly expanded my focus. The violence in our culture manifests in multiple ways. Certainly guns on the streets, but also domestic violence in the homes of our neighbor; sexual violence that gained voice in the #MeToo movement; ethnic cleansing, and bullying are some of many examples of the violence we perpetrate on one another.

One of the speakers tied all of these together in a way that I believe informs our response as Christians. He said that the commonality of violence in our culture, regardless of where the violence is or how it is acted out, the common thread, is disconnected people. A sense of *disconnection*. Honestly, I couldn't help but think of our CONNECT theme of this year. The stakes sure are higher when you think of "connect" in this context. Thinking about connection as saving lives puts it in the intended context of the spiritual practice, I believe. Much more than social engagement, connect as a spiritual practice is life-giving.

Violence rooted in disconnection. It makes sense really. Perpetrators of mass shootings are often described as loners or outliers. Violent gangs are attractive to kids seeking a sense of belonging. Victims of domestic violence become disconnected from their sources of strength and support because our

domestic lives are so disconnected from each other. Even entire cultures are disconnected from one another, leading to misunderstanding and a fear of the other.

Since Lent we have been exploring how the teachings of Jesus inform the practice of connecting with our neighbor. Last Sunday, in the story of the Good Samaritan, acted out before our eyes, many of us recognized ourselves in all the people who passed by the wounded neighbor. Then on these slips of paper, we each asked God to remove that which keeps us from extending compassion to the other. *We are too busy. We don't know our neighbor's needs. We are afraid. We don't know how to help.* I haven't read those, but I'm guessing that's what's written on many. All familiar obstacles that further disconnect us from our neighbors, and from growing more like Jesus.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus is having a meal with Pharisees. (I should mention, given our common excuse of being too busy, Jesus healed a sick man on the way to the party, even though it probably made him late!) Pharisees are the well-to-do in their day, leaders well-respected for their knowledge and influence, and considered the center of social circles. In other words, Jesus could be attending any north shore gathering.

He's been observing the social practices around him. He's noticed that relatives and friends are invited over for meals; and then those same guests, friends and family, are expected to reciprocate, and return the invitation. During this gathering, he's also noticing that when these guests accept the invitation, they assume the "good seats" are for them; because they are the guests. This is how the community practiced hospitality in that day, not unlike

today. But Jesus' hospitality looks completely different. When you throw a party like this, he says, invite those whom you would *never imagine* inviting. Even invite those you'd be *afraid* to invite. Furthermore, Jesus says, invite those who could not possibly return the invitation! By doing so, he adds, *you* will be blessed.

We recognize this is not an isolated teaching of Jesus. Throughout the gospels, he commands us to notice and include those on the margins, the disconnected, and to meet their needs. In fact, he says that when you provide for them, you provide for Jesus himself (Matt 25:40). Professor Christine Pohl, author of *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition*, describes hospitality as a lens through which we can read and understand much of the gospel. In fact, this gospel hospitality became one of the *distinguishing characteristics* of Christians in the ancient world, not only because it reflected the life and teaching of Jesus, but because it was so contrary to the culture of the day.¹ It was the core practice of Jesus' followers.

Hospitality today though, has evolved into entertainment, and entertainment of friends and family instead of the stranger and sojourner as it was in biblical times. Hospitality became an industry, a college major even! We can't discount the importance of gathering with friends and family. That's a foundational part of connection and community. But the hospitality that Jesus teaches reaches beyond friends and family to the overlooked. It's an embodied presence with the stranger in need, modeled after the life of Jesus. Recovering and reclaiming that hospitality ensures everyone has a place at the

¹ https://www.wichurches.org/sitecontent/pdf_files/programs/hospitality.pdf

table, and that feels of greater importance than ever before now, in a time when the stakes are high, when lack of connection can breed all kinds of dysfunction, including violence.

One fifth grade teacher feels that importance as well. Every Friday since the Columbine school shootings, she has her students give her a confidential list of who they would like to sit with the following week. She also asks them to name one student who was an "exceptional citizen" this week. Her primary purpose is not to create a seating chart or special award. She does this to look for patterns: Who is overlooked? Who is disconnected from the other students? Who is left out? She too knows that violence begins with disconnection, and goes outside of her routine to see the students who are being overlooked.²

Do we see? And who do we not see? Because our hospitality is limited to the circle of people we already know, or our conversation is limited to superficial knowing, it is not the transformative hospitality that Jesus describes here. It does not offer opportunity to create connections with those suffering from disconnection – those different from us, the silently suffering, the outcast. But recovering and reclaiming the good news hospitality which Jesus calls us to is costly. It means we're going to have to be intentional about seeking the overlooked. It means we might end up serving those whom we might otherwise describe as undeserving, or inappropriate, or ungrateful. It might mean some awkward conversation as we get to know one another. And you know what else? All this effort may have no apparent benefit to us; no

² <http://momastery.com/blog/2014/01/30/share-schools/>

immediate payback. Rather, we would be inviting and including, not because of what we'll get in return, but out of the realization that we are *all* in need of God's grace, and that we are all vulnerable and in need of connection.

Gospel hospitality requires significant vulnerability. I wonder if some of you wrote, "I'm afraid" on your prayer note, the reason you don't show compassion to the stranger. I could add that. Certainly some of the people in the Good Samaritan story who passed by the injured man, were indifferent, or thought they were too busy. But some, no doubt, were legitimately scared. They could easily contract a contagious and serious disease. They could be rejected by society, which would mean a loss of livelihood for them. Fear is a reasonable consideration, given the state of our world. But not the only consideration.

Fr. Daniel Homer, a Benedictine monk for over 40 years, writes, "The state of the world is not the biggest obstacle [to Christian hospitality], it's the state of our hearts and minds".³ The state of our hearts and minds. Are our hearts open to what God might do in relationship with the other? Do our minds calculate the payoff in this-world currency, rather than kingdom-currency, the blessings of God? Jesus said to do this and you will be blessed. Blessed. Gospel hospitality, when we open our hearts and very lives to welcoming and accepting the other, as Jesus welcomes and accepts us, we are blessed. It's mysterious. And it's transformative.

The hospitality shown to us by Jesus is not a social grace but a spiritual practice, shaping us into the people God created us to be, into the image of

³ Daniel Homan, O.S. B. and Lonnie Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality – A Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008) 16.

God. Our challenge now is to practice it. To practice it this week, and to keep practicing. And when we do, we might just be blessed with a glimpse of the Kingdom.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, open our eyes to see those around us who are overlooked, disconnected, and in need. Give us the compassion of Christ that motivates us to reach out and be present for that person. Help us to see your face in that neighbor and to offer the same love you have for us. By the power of your Spirit, transform us both. Amen.