

Luke 14.7-14

“The Two Tables of Hospitality”

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Ordinary Time

Since I returned from my Sabbatical in late August I’ve been preaching a kind of “core values of Colleyville Presbyterian Church” sermon series over the past two months or so.

We’ve talked about how the Gentleness of Jesus which us frees us to be gentle with one another. We’ve talked about the blessing of dwelling in genuine community with one another in the local church. We’ve talked about how discipleship to Jesus means leaving the shallows and following him out into the deep waters, which is where he makes us new.

We’ve talked about how prayer is not really about praying for what we think we “ought” to pray for, but is actually the intimate, vulnerable act of offering our true desires to God. We’ve talked about, over three sermons, the centrality of Lord’s Day practices for our congregation - how Sunday is commanded by God to be a day we set apart for worship and rest and giving rest to others.

And next week, we will return to our exposition of Hebrews, picking up in Hebrews chapter 7.

But this morning, as I conclude this “core values” series, I want to talk about hospitality - and specifically the way in which hospitality is a way of living that Christians are called to embrace because of the way in which God has made himself our host.

We've heard this morning already from Exodus 24, Hebrews 12-13, and Luke 22. And so now I want to add to those readings by reading also from Luke 14:12-14. This is actually a shorter reading than what is printed on the back of your order of worship - just Luke 14:12-14.

The context of this passage is that it is the Sabbath day, and Jesus is having lunch after the weekly worship service at the house of a wealthy Pharisee. Jesus has just healed a man as an expression of the reality that the purpose of the Sabbath day is not only to enjoy rest themselves, but also to give rest to others.

And now, after healing this man, Jesus makes this statement, which is a kind of purpose statement for what biblical hospitality truly is.

Listen now to God's word from Luke 14:12-14.

12 He [that is, Jesus] said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. 13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Since I was called to be your pastor seven years ago, hospitality has been something I've been talking about with you all pretty constantly. I spoke about it during the public Q&A time when you were considering voting for me to become your pastor.

I've written pastoral letters about hospitality. I spoken about it from the pulpit. I've emphasized hospitality during leadership training. I've sought to embody hospitality in my own life, as our family has regularly hosted families from the church in our home for lunch or supper - usually three or four times a month.

But, talking about hospitality so much as I've done, I want to be careful that I'm not giving the impression that hospitality is some kind of moral duty disconnected from everything else we are as a church, or even worse, that hospitality is some kind of church growth strategy or technique that I'm just trying to get you all to buy into.

No, friends - hospitality is much more than that. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that hospitality is one of the most natural expressions of discipleship - because, as Christians, we are called into a life of hospitality - a life of offering love and kindness and food and welcome to strangers, because we are those who have received all those things from God.

So first, a definition of hospitality, and then a discussion of the two tables of hospitality, and how they are related to one another.

The greek word for hospitality, which is used five times in the New Testament - in Romans, Hebrews (as we heard in our reading this morning), 1 Timothy, Titus, and 1 Peter, is *philoxenia* - a word that simply means "Love of Stranger."

Hospitality, biblically speaking, is gratuitous - it is not welcoming someone who will repay you by welcoming you in return - rather it is serving, loving, feeding a person or group of persons who you don't necessarily already know, and it is given freely - without any expectation of return.

And of course, this is the definition of hospitality that Jesus gives, as we heard just a moment ago: *“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. 13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”*

So, biblically speaking, this is what hospitality is.

It's not just welcoming people into your home based on your years of friendship or your common interests, or your shared social class. Rather, it is being a host to a stranger, welcoming someone into your space, into your home, and serving them and sharing food with them without any expectation of return.

And defined this way, hospitality is one of the most radical social practices that exist in the history of the human race. It is utterly different than how any of us naturally live - because all of us are tempted to live in such a way where our whole life is based on a kind of implicit quid pro quo system - I help you because I have confidence that you'll help me in exchange.

But the biblical definition of hospitality is based on the character of our God - because God, of course, is the host, he is the one who has, as Paul puts it, loved us even when we were his enemies, and welcomes us to his table even though we cannot repay him.

And that leads us to talk about the two tables of biblical Hospitality. God's table, which is here in this sanctuary where we are invited to feed on Christ each week, and our tables in our homes.

So first, let's talk about God's table.

In many ways, the whole story of the Bible is how God is a gracious host and has prepared a feast for his people. The story the Scriptures tell is the story of God's table, and the hospitality he gives.

This theme of God's table starts at the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, where God makes all of creation, and then, as his last act, makes Adam and Eve, and gives them the whole world for their food and nourishment.

As God says in Genesis 1: *"Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food."*

God, in creation, is a prodigal and generous host, offering the whole world to humanity as his table at which they are welcome.

And read this way, of course, the fall of humanity is Adam and Eve's rejection of God's table and God's hospitality, choosing instead to eat at the table of the Serpent, to receive the false hospitality of Satan by eating of the one tree that was prohibited from them.

But God's hospitality does not end in creation. Even when humanity estranges themselves from him, even when Adam and Eve make themselves his enemies, still God continues to invite humanity to his table.

In Genesis 9, after the flood, God offers Noah and his family the whole world again, saying: *"Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything."*

And God's table continues.

When God calls Abram and Sarai to leave their homeland and travel to the land of Canaan, he gives them a land of plenty, a land where their flocks can graze and grow.

When a famine strikes the land, God provides for Abram and his family in the land of Egypt. And when Abram delivers his nephew Lot from the captivity, God appears in the form of his priest Melchizedek, offering Abram a feast of bread and wine.

When famine comes again to Jacob and his sons, God sends Joseph into Egypt that he might prepare a rich table for them, and years later when Pharaoh turns Egypt from a house of bread into a house of slavery for Israel, God intervenes again as a gracious host, giving the nation of Israel the feast of passover, which became the means of their deliverance from bondage.

And this feast of the passover is an interesting one, because Exodus 12 records specifically that the Lord intended it not only for the direct descendants of Abraham, but also for any stranger in the land who desired to come and feed at God's table - and so the people who left Egypt were a mixed multitude - ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles bound together by eating together at the table of God, enjoying the Hospitality of their Redeemer.

And, of course, God continues to invite Israel to eat at his table throughout their time in the wilderness, despite their grumbling and disobedience - for those many years he gives them water from the rock, quail from the sky, and manna from heaven, before finally leading them into a land of milk and honey.

Indeed, God describes his relationship to Israel in Psalm 81 as a host. He says: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it...I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."*

God's table is a rich table - he is a generous host, and the prophets of Israel take up this theme.

In fact Isaiah imagines that the Lord would one day enter into history and provide a feast for all people, a feast of rich food and well-aged wine, a time when again, all of creation would become the table of God offered richly and freely to the men and women and children he loves.

And then Jesus enters the scene. The Son is like the Father, and the Son of God comes eating and drinking, in his own self-description. This is how he will reveal God to us - through food and drink, by means of bread and wine.

The core of Jesus' ministry and life is a kind of radically hospitable table fellowship as he eats with both the wealthy and the poor, with the socially powerful and the social outcasts, and most famously, with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus welcomes Zacheus into the kingdom of God by asking himself over for lunch so they can break bread together, and he tells the five thousand to sit down and rest on the green grass so that he can feed them.

And then, towards the end of his life, as we read in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus takes on the role of host in a new way.

He plans and organizes a passover meal for his closest disciples in the upper room, and when the meal begins he takes the bread in his hands and says: "This is my body, given for you, take and eat," and then the wine: "This is my blood, poured out for you, take and drink."

And so, from that time forward, God's table, where God is both the host AND the feast, is put at the center of what it means to live a Christian life.

To be a Christian, Jesus teaches and demonstrates by his actions, is fundamentally to be a person who continually eats and drinks at the table of God, who is nourished always by the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and this sustenance at God's table in this life is actually a foretaste of the end of history, which will be the revelation of the unending Great Table of God, the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb.

That's what it means to be a Christian. To sit down and eat at the table God provides.

And this, of course, leads us to the second table of hospitality, which is the table in our homes.

What I want you to see, beloved, is that you are invited each Lord's Day to the holy table of God.

And each week, you return to your homes, and because you are a holy person who eats at God's table, your own dining room tables in your homes are not just places where your body's need for food is fulfilled, but those tables are transformed into holy places, places where you extend the hospitality of God to others.

Your tables in your homes become places where you, united as you are to Jesus, the Great Host, serve in union with him as a host to strangers, welcoming them also taste and see that the Lord is good.

This, beloved, is why hospitality is such a big deal in the Bible.

When Abraham and Sarah rush to prepare a feast for the three strangers who visit them in Genesis 18, they're not just being polite. They're living out the hospitality of God that they themselves have received.

When David welcomes lame Mephibosheth to eat continually at his own table in 2 Samuel 9, he's not acting out of some politically shrewd motivation - he's living as one who has himself learned to eat at the table of God.

And when Paul confronts Peter for refusing to eat with uncircumcised Christians, or when Paul later corrects the rich Christians in Corinth for refusing to wait for their poor brothers and sisters to arrive before eating the eucharistic meal, he's not just trying to help people get along - he is saying that the way in which Christians eat with others, the table fellowship of the church, is actually the heart of the gospel itself - because we are those who eat at the table of God and extend that table to others.

And when the writer to the Hebrews says: *"Let us offer to to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe"* and then two verses later says, *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,"* he is making a theological point - he is saying that Christian worship leads directly to hospitality.

He is saying that eating at God's table is inextricably linked to inviting others to eat at your table.

In other words, the writer to the Hebrews is saying, as I am saying, that to eat at the Lord's Table on Sunday morning means you are called, by God, to intentionally welcome others to your dining room table on Sunday afternoon or Friday evening.

And who should we welcome to our tables? To whom should we extend our hospitality. Well, friends, Jesus has told us. He's given us instruction for our tables.

He has said that our guest list for our tables should not primarily be our friends or brothers or relatives or rich neighbors or those who can repay us by returning the favor.

Rather, the recipients of our holy practices of hospitality should be the stranger. The poor. The crippled and the lame and the blind.

Because it is in this way that we demonstrate and live out the hospitality of God. It is in this way that the Two Tables of Hospitality - God's Table and Our Tables work in concert together, just as God intends.

As we close this morning, I just want to give a few practical applications for what hospitality might look like for you as you follow Jesus at our church.

First, hospitality is simple. I know that some of you feel constricted from practicing hospitality because you feel like your home isn't big enough or you live in an apartment or your house isn't fixed up the way you'd like or you don't feel like you have time to cook a big meal and clean everything up.

And I would just say, friend, it's ok. How do you think Christians practiced hospitality in the first few centuries of the church? I can promise you that they weren't inviting people into their large, immaculate homes to eat expensive meals. Because that's not what Biblical hospitality is all about.

No, hospitality is simple, and if you have space in your home for one extra person to eat at your table, then friend, you can practice Biblical hospitality.

The meal you provide doesn't have to be fancy or expensive. In fact, it's probably better if it's simple.

In fact, I am convinced that one of the best practical ways of putting strangers at ease when they come into your home is making sure things in your house are at least a little messy and serving them something to eat that isn't overly complicated.

In this way we communicate to strangers and new friends that this isn't a restaurant or a museum. This is a home. And this is a home where you are welcome at our table.

Second, hospitality is intentional. The reality is, our lives being what they are, you'll probably never get into the habit of practicing hospitality unless you get into the habit of planning for it. Each month, think about the Sundays. Think about which ones you could have people over. And then start sending out some emails or making some phone calls. The reality is that you're only going to ever do this if you put some thought and effort into it.

And if you need contact info for someone, don't hesitate to let me know. I've got pretty much everyone's email and phone number and home address. And I'd love to help connect you with someone you want to have over for dinner. That's not an imposition on my time. That's the kind of thing a pastor should be doing. So think about hospitality. If you're married, talk to your spouse about it. And make some plans that you can put into action.

Thirdly, hospitality is rightly directed toward the stranger.

Now, there is a time and place for getting together with good friends and family and people you know well. But biblically speaking, that isn't really hospitality.

No, hospitality is welcoming someone you don't already know, someone who is a bit of a stranger, someone who is different from yourself into your home, into your space, and making them feel comfortable, putting them at ease, getting to know them in a new way - and letting them get to know you.

And I'm guessing, unless you are an unusually intentional person, that this church is actually full of people you don't yet know well - either because they're new, or because they sit on the other side of the sanctuary from you, or because you just haven't yet connected.

And that's it. That's your target list. That's where you begin with hospitality. That's where you begin to live out the life that God has given you by welcoming you to his table.

And one day, if you want to be really crazy and wild in the context of our culture, you might even work up the nerve to practice biblical hospitality by knocking on your literal neighbor's door and invite *them* over for dinner.

But that's another sermon.

As we close this morning, I want to close with the words of Jesus. Listen to them once more.

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. 13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

That's it. That's the mission of the people of God. To eat at the table of God, and to extend that table out into the world. That's hospitality.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.