

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?
Luke 14:1, 7-14; Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

This morning's reading from Hebrews was probably written to a community of believers who had been subjected to persecution, imprisonment, and loss of property as a result of their faith. These Christians are exhorted by the writer to persevere in following Jesus' example. So the first two verses in Hebrews 13 are: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Heb. 13: 1-2) The author of Hebrews connects this with the Old Testament story of Abraham, who once entertained strangers, only to discover they were angels of God. Sometimes, when we think we're just practicing hospitality and being nice to strangers, we receive God.

There's a wordplay in the original Greek: The fellowship here translated as "mutual love" is the word *philadelphia* – love of brothers and sisters. The "hospitality to strangers" is the word *philoxenia* – love of outsiders (opposite of xenophobia – fear of strangers/outside). Both are essential to a Christian community.

Jesus picks up on this idea of showing hospitality to strangers in today's passage from Luke. Jesus is at the house of a Pharisee, which, if you think about it, is a rather gracious thing for the Pharisee to do, considering that Jesus has a rather tempestuous relationship with Pharisees in Luke's Gospel. Maybe this Pharisee invited Jesus to his house hoping to affect some kind of reconciliation.

Well, forget it. No sooner is Jesus at the Pharisee's dinner table than he starts an argument. When he notices how the guests chose the places of honor, he has the temerity to challenge the other guests and even the host and his guest list for the dinner.

Meals are a big deal in the Gospel of Luke. Meals were not only an important Near Eastern social convention by which people were recognized in their class and rank in society, but meals also have theological significance. It's in Luke 13:29 where we read the familiar refrain that's often said when we celebrate communion, that there will be a day when people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. One of the things that the Messiah would do is to hold a great banquet and invite people, especially poor people, to come and feast.

This meal at the house of the Pharisee becomes a drama in four parts. First, a man is healed of dropsy – an abnormal accumulation of fluid beneath

the skin (14:2-6). Then Jesus notes the one-upmanship of the guests at the table (14:7-11). Next Jesus instructs the host on who really should be invited to the dinner (14:12-14), and finally he tells a parable of a great banquet (14:15-24). The passage we read today focuses on the two middle sections.

Jesus tells the guests that they should not seek the places of honor at the feast, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (14:11). Note that Jesus uses the passive tense – the humbling and exaltation will be done by God. It’s God who lifts up the lowly, and it’s God who pushes down the high and mighty – we’re reminded of Mary’s song when Jesus was born that’s found at the beginning of Luke.

In other words, “Jesus is not telling people how they should behave when they come to a party but rather he is talking to people about how God behaves. There is something about this God that exalts the lowly and humbles the mighty.”¹

Then Jesus teaches his host about God’s definition of hospitality. When we give a dinner, it’s natural for us to invite our closest friends. By

¹ William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource” Aug. 29. 2010, p. 38.

inviting our friends, a cycle of reciprocity is set in motion. We invite others; then they pay us back by receiving us.

Jesus proposes a complete break in this cycle. We're to show hospitality to strangers, and not just any strangers: Jesus proposes we invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, people who can never repay our invitation. These people will never be able to show reciprocity.

Who in the world thinks that this way of giving dinner parties is correct? Who acts like this? The One who was in the form of God but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave; the One who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Tom Long, my preaching professor in seminary, says that he grew up in a small community church in rural Georgia. Most of the farmers and shopkeepers and their families who attended this church were just everyday, ordinary people. Long remembers one Sunday morning when something happened that challenged their faith.

While they were in worship, a stranger appeared, walking in the side door. Judging from his clothes and appearance, he probably had wandered over from the railroad tracks, people figured. He was perhaps one of the drifters who rode the rails. Perhaps he was someone who had come in off the highway, just passing through. The stranger walked in and walked past

the preacher and the congregation in the middle of the Sunday sermon. The congregation all looked at the man, and he looked back at them. The preacher even stopped his sermon and stared at the man. The man did not take a seat; he was not offered a seat. The man spoke not a word and not a word was spoken to him. He simply looked out across the congregation, paused for a few moments, and walked out the door on the opposite side. The preacher collected himself, and he continued with his sermon.

But after church that day, says Long, members of the congregation gathered around the base of the big oak tree out front and they discussed what had happened. For the next two or three Sundays they gathered out under the oak tree after the service and continued their discussion. They never knew who the stranger was. But they knew, says Long, that God had put before them a kind of moral test. And they had flunked. They had their opportunity to stand up and be faithful and show hospitality to the stranger, the same sort of hospitality that had been shown toward them by God, and they failed the test.

Long says that no one in that little Georgia congregation had ever heard of an early Christian treatise named *The Didascalia*, which says that if a stranger enters your worship, and the Lord's Supper had been spread out before the congregation, and there is nowhere for the stranger to sit at the

table, the Bishop, presiding at communion, is to sit on the floor, so that the stranger may be welcomed in the name of Christ. Every congregation is measured to a great extent by its ability to receive the stranger.²

As the Roman Empire broke down amid social chaos and violence, Saint Benedict charged monastic communities to “receive guests as Christ” and to embrace the poor, outcast, strangers, and pilgrims. The heart of Benedictine spirituality is hospitality: a Christian community is not a closed community but extends welcome and shelter to all, regardless of class, status, or respectability. Joan Chittister, a contemporary Catholic writer, says, “Hospitality means we take people into the space that is our lives and our minds and our hearts and our work and our efforts. Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves.

That’s a high calling. I know that I struggle with this in my own life – I’ve never thrown a dinner party and invited the poor, outcast, and strangers. The good news is that God knows that’s not a natural thing for us to do. As we work to develop our hospitality so that it more closely resembles what Jesus was talking about, we can stay encouraged, because we know that God will be with us every step of the way, even when we fail. We know our calling: we’re to let mutual love continue and not neglect to show

² Pulpit Resource, 8-29-10, p. 39.

hospitality to strangers, for by doing so we may be entertaining angels
without knowing it. Amen.