

The Table of Hospitality

Luke 7:36-50
May 14, 2017

The idea for this series grew out of conversations at Worship Commission about how we get to know each other. We reflected that we are good at welcoming people when they come through our doors, and start to attend regularly. But once people have been with us a while, we wondered how do we get to know each other at a deeper level? How do we learn to know the gifts, interests, and passions of others here? How do we begin to include people in the life of the congregation beyond Sunday morning? How do we really see and know each other?

With these questions in mind, we started talking about a worship series on being seen and known. And then the political situation in this country began to deteriorate quickly, and this series, which began as a way to explore deepening our relationships with each other, grew to include reaching out to the vulnerable—particularly the refugee and the immigrant. The image of a table that extends to include everyone seemed to capture what we wanted to explore; this table is already extended to include each of us, as we place ourselves in the grand biblical story of God’s hospitality and welcome (last week); it is a table that can also be made smaller for more quiet and intimate exchanges of being seen and known; it is a table that includes everyone in all of our wonderful diversity. This table includes all of us here at Berkey; in addition, the image of the table had us considering our community of Goshen. This table invites us to celebrate the ways in which we have been a community of welcome; and it invites us to confess and name the times when we have failed to see who is missing from the table; when we have failed to even extend an invitation to the table. The hope for this series is that we will move outside of our comfort zones and talk to people during fellowship time who we’ve never talked to; maybe you will want to consciously sit in a different place in the sanctuary. As we look ahead to July, one opportunity you will have is to attend a place of worship that is different from worship here at Berkey.

The biblical story for today gives us a window into the kind of hospitality we are being invited to practice and live. It is a story of one table that in many ways is the metaphor for all tables of Christian fellowship. In this story, Jesus is the guest of

Simon, the Pharisee. Most likely, at this dinner there was good conversation and comfortable interaction. From the description of the woman coming up behind Jesus, we know that they were reclining at the table, a common way to eat for those who were wealthy or privileged. They would lean on their left arms, with their feet out behind them. Only a free citizen could recline; women, children and slaves, if they were present, would have had to sit. (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 6, p. 303) Sharing a meal together, fellowship around the table, were important in the ancient world; who you invited and who you didn't invite to your table was socially determined. Tables were one way of maintaining social structures.

Jesus ate at many tables throughout his ministry; and as he did so, he broke all the rules of table fellowship. In the gospels, he is accused of "eating with tax collectors and sinners". In fact, just a few verses before our passage begins, Jesus says to the people around him—after John's followers came to find out if Jesus was the one John was preaching about, or whether they should wait for another—"John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (vv. 33-34) In many ways, this phrase, "friend of tax collectors and sinners," defined Jesus' ministry and the nature of the Kingdom of God—the normal rules of social engagement don't apply.

In the Middle East, these dinner parties weren't necessarily held behind closed doors. Houses were more open; there was lots of coming and going; it was not unusual for others who weren't invited to the table, to hang out around the edges of the group, listening in on the discussions. Into this mix of people—invited guests and curious and interested observers—comes a woman from the city, who was a sinner. While she was not an invited guest, she also didn't break into Simon's house, which we might assume, given how we host dinner parties. (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 5) This woman comes up behind Jesus and begins to weep, washing his feet with her tears, and drying them with her hair. She then takes ointment and anoints his feet. In these actions, she embodies first century hospitality.

A custom in ancient times is this practice of washing the feet of guests. In fact, it is the host's job to do this, or see that it is done, since the roads are dusty and people wore sandals. It is also customary for the host to kiss the guest, and

possibly anoint them with oil. Simon does none of these things, for whatever reason. Because he neglects to do these things, he has not fulfilled his role as host. This woman, this uninvited guest, performs the role of the host as she washes Jesus' feet. Jesus receives her in this hosting role, and offers himself to her as a guest. She becomes the model host, and embodies what it looks like to show great love.

This story illustrates how fluid the roles of host and guest are. In fact, in most of the stories of Jesus at the table, he moves freely between the roles of host and guest. He is generally the guest at someone else's table, but when he breaks bread and offers it to others, he becomes the host. Through Jesus' ministry and table fellowship, we see the mutuality that is characteristic of Jesus' table: guests become hosts and hosts become guests; everyone has something to give and something to receive. Guests and hosts alike need each other, for we all need what the other brings to the table. If there are no guests, there is no host; if there are no hosts, there can be no guests.

The one constant in all the biblical stories, however, is that God is always the host. In relation to God, we are all guests at the biblical table of fellowship. And at God's table, the rules of social class, race, ethnicity, ability, family, gender, and culture are different. At God's table, to be accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners, with undocumented immigrants and refugees, is high praise. It means we have joined in the radical work of the kingdom and have turned the normal rules of engagement on their heads. At God's table, with the usual social norms overturned, there is joy and celebration that the lost have been found, the hungry are being fed, the lonely are brought into relationship and the homeless are given shelter.

The NT word for hospitality is *xenos*, meaning stranger, or foreigner, or even enemy; but most times, when used in the bible, it refers to both guest and host. One who receives visitors is called *philoxenos*, meaning a "lover of strangers"; one who receives visitors is said to be practicing *philoxenia*, "love of strangers". (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 3, p. 299) It is telling that in English, we have retained the meaning of *xenos* as stranger, but we add the word *phobia* to it, and talk about 'fear of strangers'. Xenophobia is part of our language, but philoxenia is not. As Christians, we should return to our biblical roots of hospitality, as lovers of strangers, and adopt into our common usage, philoxenia.

Christine Pohl is a professor of Christian social ethics, and has done a lot of work on Christian practices, particularly the practice of hospitality. She outlines this biblical concept of hospitality as welcoming the vulnerable and poor into one's home and community of faith that the early church practiced. Based on Jesus' own ministry, the early church practiced this radical hospitality as a reflection of God's hospitality—welcoming the undeserving, providing the lonely with a home and feeding the hungry. The result of these early Christian communities receiving the stranger among them, was that those needing food and shelter also received the gift of fellowship by being incorporated into the worshipping community. Over time, this kind of hospitality was institutionalized in hospitals and hospices, until those in need were cared for by professionals and no longer incorporated into the community of faith, which meant the greatest gift of all, being part of the worshipping community, was denied them. Over time, hospitality became equated with welcoming family and friends. (Christine Pohl, "Hospitality, A Practice and a Way of Life", *Vision* journal, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2002, p. 36)

We have watered down and distracted ourselves from radical, biblical hospitality because we have let the "hospitality" industry define it; it has been reduced to good cooking, a comfortable bed, and Martha Stewart decorations. But the hospitality of Jesus had to do with who was sitting around the table, not what was on the table. Hospitality in Jesus' terms is not a task, but a way of life; and it flows out of our response of gratitude for the love and welcome of God for us.

But this kind of hospitality in the way of Jesus is hard work; it requires a lot of us. Just look at Simon; being the host is being willing to expand your table to include those deemed socially unacceptable; being willing to let your guests also host you; it is being willing to be changed and challenged by those who sit at the table with you. Simon is a great example that we won't always be successful in our hosting endeavours. We will make mistakes; we will overlook those who would benefit from being invited. But again, at Jesus' table is the grace of acceptance and the freedom for others to step in and cover our mistakes. And that person may well be the one we overlook; the one we least expect to do so.

Hospitality in the way of Jesus is not an additional activity one can add to one's schedule, but it is a total re-prioritizing and re-ordering of our lives. It is reaching out to, and including the least of these, welcoming them to the table, and being willing to receive the gifts they offer. It is sharing the roles of host and guest with the poor, the vulnerable, the marginal, offering what we have to them, receiving

what we need from them. And we learn it first by how well we welcome each other and make room for each other here in this place.

Hospitality is hard work and it is risky work. Engaging with each other reveals not just our gifts and strengths, but our weaknesses and vulnerabilities as hosts, and as flawed human beings. Fellowship around the table and in worship and community has “a way of laying bare our lives and surfacing our inadequacies.” (Pohl, p. 41) As hosts there is the continual need to recognize where we ourselves are wounded and have an ongoing need for grace and mercy. If we can accept our flaws, then we will be able to continually draw on the strength and hope that comes from God.

Hospitality also takes courage; just look at the woman, who courageously entered a dinner party to which she wasn't invited, and then performed the role of host. She dared to believe that she belonged and had something to offer to Jesus. She risked taking her place at the table, and in doing so was given the gift of forgiveness and freedom.

Hospitality is risky business. But while it is hard work, there is much joy, for radical hospitality grows out of our own joy and gratitude for the hospitality God has shown to us. When we recognize the immensity of what we have received, we in turn offer that to others with joy. It is news that is too good to keep to ourselves. At God's table, there is grace and joy and celebration, as we all come as we are, offer what we have, and receive what we need. This table is long and wide and deep and everyone belongs. Thanks be to God!