

Luke 14: 16-24

When Hospitality is Hard

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The Congregational Church of Needham

All during September we have been discussing the theme of hospitality. We have talked about good meals served in the Bibles and in our own homes. I talked about a family in Maine that opened their home every week to strangers when the dad was deployed overseas for a year, and how their hospitality to others made that separation bearable and so much better. You can find the book that tells their story, *Dinner with the Smileys*, in our Church bookstore. We have talked about how we can be more hospitable to strangers and to one another. As a direct result of this theme, I am happy to report that this month two families invited me to have dinner with them, and the deacons are going to talk about organizing more potluck suppers for the church in the months ahead.

Jesus eats out a lot. In Luke's gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, eating with people, or going home from such a gathering. So many of Christ's stories take place around tables that his enemies accuse him of being a glutton and a drunkard. You know there is always some truth in your worst critic's barbs, so I imagine that Jesus enjoyed his food and wine – and people who admired Jesus and those who did not all knew that he loved a good party.

But today's story is about a party gone wrong. Today's reading is about a hospitality nightmare. Today's story would give most of us so much anxiety that we'd never entertain again. A man decided to have a big feast. He sent out invitations to lots of his friends and family. He ordered plenty of good food, procured some excellent wine, and prepared for a feast that would have lasted several days, potentially. Then on the day of the party when he failed to see people

arriving so he sent his servants out to see where they all were. All his friends have excuses. What a horrible breach of conduct! What an insult to this host! How rude, really. Some people might have felt so rejected that they gave up on the whole idea. But this man does not indulge in self-pity or crave isolation. He gets so angry at his first list of guests that he tells his servants to go out to the street and invite strangers to the party. What is Jesus telling us in this story and why does it carry both hope and a warning for our lives today?

In the first place **we need hospitality.** We all know that we **need to be** hospitable. But here I am saying that **we** benefit from opening our homes, and entertaining others. It is actually good for us to welcome friends and strangers. The connections we make around tables nourishes our souls.

Why do you suppose the man whose guests had snubbed him continue to have a party after all? Not just because the food was ordered, but because he knew he needed the party. He was psyched to have a feast. Jesus says that hospitality is more than a duty; it is joy. It nurtures **us** to host a gathering. Tonight when we start the Alpha program for new members and visitors in our church we will begin with a good meal. The meal is essential to the program; we all relax over the tables of food.

Whenever I visit my son and daughter-in-law I am impressed by how organized their lives are. With two full time careers and two small children, like many of you, they work hard to keep a lot of balls in the air. Their way of coping with all the many demands on their time is to keep a pretty rigorous schedule. Meals, workouts at the gym, baths and bedtimes all happen at a clip. One delightful ritual surprised me, though. My oldest granddaughter has started kindergarten and she rides the bus to school. For ten minutes every morning all the neighbors in this sophisticated suburb of Washington DC gather at the school bus stop. Adults laugh jovially. Children chat. As the bus arrives everyone waves. Hugs and kisses abound like they are sending family on a ship to the New World, instead of a day of elementary school. Then, once the bus

departs cheerful greetings and well wishes are shouted among the neighbors in this highly educated and competitive community. The joy at this bus stop is palpable and life-giving. In a part of America where the traffic is brutal and the treadmill- literally and figuratively – is a way of life, the hospitality at the bus stop has become an oasis in everyone's day. We need hospitality.

In the second place hospitality is hard to imagine today.

Most Americans today are drowning in good things to do, but no time to do it all. We multitask even when it means we are not fully present to the things we enjoy. We feel guilty when we have downtime. We believe that productivity is linked with happiness. The Senior Minister of All Souls Church in Manhattan wrote an article in the Psychology Today blog entitled “Are you too busy to have a life?” He questioned whether all the hustle bustle he sees in people today is really adding up to the good life. “What is the point of all this activity? What is the purpose of it? When people just start trying to get everything done, they have missed something. Why do you do all the things you do each day?” he writes. Most of us are too busy to stop and ask that questions very often.

I wonder what would happen if Jesus told that story today. If that man invited you to his party would you have time? Would his invitation represent one more commitment in a very busy schedule? Would we be the ones with the excuses? Jesus reminds us that life is full of choices. You have the power to say yes to the things you think you need, and to the things that ultimately nourish you. You have that power. If you feel you have lost it you can take it back.

Every Sunday morning we consider our lives in light of God's purpose and the Bible's wisdom. We pray about our priorities, put our long list of to do's down for a minute and think about the trajectory of our lives. Here in worship we lay down this LIST, all those good things that can become a burden, and find our way home to the spiritual truth of a tradition that has

stood the test of time. Something about this Sunday morning ritual calls us to our best selves.

We listen to the Bible and find something life-giving.

Jesus says, a life that really satisfies you will not fall in your lap. You have to choose it. You have to prioritize it. Finally, God keeps coming to you with new opportunities to find the best that life has to offer. In our story, the man invited all the right people to his dinner party and no one accepted his invitation. Then in desperation he invited strangers and they came in droves. They gave him something new. They reminded him of his humanity. They valued him. Though it was humbling to be rejected by his friends, these poor stranger brought a new abundance, that most of us under-estimate.

Last week I attended this author luncheon with Sarah Smiley who wrote *Dinner at the Smileys*. It took place in the Wellesley Bookstore. They had an event planner for the meal. She had catered the luncheon, decorated the buffet table and spread out lovely platters of salad and sandwiches served with plates and silverware that she told us she had brought from her own home. All the suburban ladies arrived on time, and the author began to speak about how she had made it through her husband's deployment by having her three sons invite local celebrities, and favorite teachers for dinner each week. As Sarah told us how she discovered that perfection is over-rated when it comes to hospitality, a blind lady from Boston arrived late and shouted her apologies from the back of the room. They ushered her to a seat in front. She talked continuously, interrupted the speaker. She asked people to fill her plate twice. At first people were confused and miffed, but somehow this stranger, who clearly did not come from Wellesley made the points that Sarah was articulating come to life. She was kind and eccentric and she made us all smile. Without her this luncheon would have been another intimidatingly perfect meal. Somehow this unlikely guest turned the luncheon into something sacred.

I once heard a story about a young college student named Bill. Bill had wild hair, spiked with vivid colors, and wore a nose ring. Bill always wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans and

no shoes. Bill, started to look for a church and found one across the street from his college. What he did not know was that this church was full of people who were well dressed, conservative, and somewhat traditional. One Sunday Bill decided to visit that church. He walked into the sanctuary with his nose ring, no shoes, jeans and a T-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started, so Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat. But the church was packed, and he could not find a seat anywhere. By now, people were uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill got closer to the front of the church. When he realized there were no seats left, he squatted down and sat in the aisle. Although this was perfectly acceptable behavior at his college this had never happened before in this church! The tension in the congregation was palpable. The preacher didn't know what to do so he stood there in silence. About that time, an elderly man, one of the old patriarchs of that church, slowly made his way down the aisle toward Bill. The man was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair, and always wore a three-piece suit. He was a godly man, very elegant, dignified, traditional, and conservative. As he started walking toward this boy, everyone was saying to themselves—you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid with a nose ring, wild hair, T-shirt and jeans and no shoes, sitting on the church floor? The old man walked with a cane, so it took a long time for him to reach the boy. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the old man's cane. All eyes were focused on him. Finally, the old man reached the boy. He paused a moment, then dropped his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, the old man lowered himself and sat down next to the boy. He shook the boy's hand and welcomed him to the church.

The man in our story invited strangers to his feast, and they redeemed his friends' rudeness. The strangers at that man's party – like the strangers at Abraham's tent- remind us that we are all strangers at some level. They humble us, and make us all holy. They remind us that we don't control the guest list, or the feast or anything, really. This is not our house, our table, or our food. The odd thing is that when we let go of our expectations it is not depressing,

but freeing. We remember that this is God's house, God's table, God's food. We are all pilgrims and wanderers. "We are all beggars here," beggars who believe in the end that grace will surprise us.