

“The Gift of Hospitality”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
September 1, 2019

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 25:8-12

New Testament Lesson: Luke 14:1, 7-14

On Sunday after church, I answered a call from a woman who said she and her husband and sister-in-law were about to be kicked out of the hotel they had been living at for over a week. As tragic as that might be (particularly with last Sunday’s storms bearing down), I seldom ever pay for someone’s hotel room. It just doesn’t seem like a sustainable situation. And I’m all about helping people help themselves. But there’s also something called grace and mercy, and I am always open to that, as well.

After talking with the woman for several minutes – and praying about it – I decided to help. I paid two nights of their hotel, after stopping to buy them groceries along the way.

When I pulled into the hotel parking lot, I could tell this was a place where a lot of poor people live. And quite frankly, I felt out of place. I asked the clerk to call up and have the woman come down for the groceries. Her name is Kathy.

I hadn’t planned on going to the room where Kathy, her husband and his sister were living. But the Spirit of generosity and abundance had other plans. I had bought so many groceries she couldn’t carry them all.

So I followed her to their hotel room and watched as she went inside. Her husband – a thin fellow with a long, scraggly beard – came to help with the groceries. Looking inside, I could tell why they decided this room worked for them, for the time being. At about \$1,200 a month with utilities included and no maintenance costs, their three meager paychecks could cover the cost, and it was better than the house they had been renting – briefly – because it wasn’t much of a house – more like a condemned property, as Kathy described it.

Still, I couldn’t imagine three people living in a hotel room with just two beds and a dresser, even with its full-size fridge and stovetop. They have no space, no windows, no nothing. But right or wrong, who am I to judge?

What I can tell you is that coming into contact with people who are truly poor – regardless of your philosophy of poverty and wealth – changes a person. It changed me that day. I came away more grateful for what I have, more compassionate for those who have little, and more humble as a child of God.

Compassion and humility. I think that is what Jesus is teaching us in today's New Testament lesson. When he says, "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" for your kindness to those in need, I certainly felt somehow resurrected that day – made new. All this raises the question: who are we comfortable with, and why?

Most people like to be with their friends rather than strangers, new people. Most like to be with people somewhere near their own level, educationally, economically, socially. And here comes Jesus telling us to cross those boundaries, to more freely associate with folks who are poor and "crippled," saying you should "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" when you give a banquet.

Jesus isn't telling us to merely be nice to them or to talk with them on the sidewalk. Jesus is telling us to actually invite them into our homes, include them in our celebrations. And here I had a hard time just standing outside the door of Kathy and her family's hotel room. And not only for safety reasons. I just felt uncomfortable, like an intruder, someone who didn't fit in. Why does Jesus push us into these uncomfortable situations? Really. What is this all about?

Jesus says, "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."

Here, Jesus is freeing us to be unconditional in our giving, rather than making it about ourselves. And yet, how many of us count the times we have people over compared to the times we get invited to their house? We do that, don't we? That type of thinking doesn't make anybody happy. We feel taken advantage of and they can tell. Eventually, we write them off our guest list.

Instead, Jesus offers us the gift of humble hospitality, which comes from setting aside expectations of payback and just enjoying people's company. It's a win-win situation. Everybody is happy. Jesus also says, "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 "says Jesus", 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."

Here, Jesus is freeing us from thinking we have to impress others, build ourselves up, or always be advancing our own cause. Instead, Jesus would have us advance God's cause. He says, "...When you give do invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." You will be remade, reborn, renewed in the spirit of grace and mercy, generously and abundance.

At the time of Jesus – and also in our time to some extent – if you were to associate with people who are poor or disabled, it would threaten your social standing. People would not respect you, or look at you the same. They would not do business with you. Your livelihood would suffer.

And Jesus is saying there's something of greater value than your livelihood at stake. When you place yourself above others or use people to make yourself feel bigger, you risk your standing before God.

Now for us, I don't believe it's so much a matter of using people to elevate ourselves. No. It's more about being comfortable and having a good time, and there's nothing wrong with that. But if we never stretch beyond our comfort level to welcome outsiders, - I mean really welcome and include them at our table - then we are all the poorer.

Next Sunday we host our Fall Fling potluck for Homecoming. This is an opportunity to invite folks who may not feel like they have a place here. Maybe it's a family member who doesn't come to church. Or a former or inactive member who isn't attending anywhere else. Maybe it's a neighbor, coworker or someone from the community you know. Why not invite that person? Or how about invite the people you'll see tomorrow for Labor Day. Tell them Pastor Dave made you do it; or Jesus. Yeah, tell them Jesus made you do it. And not only invite them. Pick them up and drive them here, sit with them, make them feel welcome and included.

Now I'm sure with all this talk of inviting people the Deacons who provide the meat and beverages are afraid there won't be enough food. Let's give them that problem! Let's fill Westminster Hall for Homecoming next Sunday, and the sanctuary for worship.

And if you do have someone coming with you, let's be kind and tell the church office so the Deacons and others can have a headcount, for guests. And then, with all these new people seated around the tables, be bold and pick a new place to sit. This goes for you students and young people here today – when you're in the lunchroom at school. All of us, let's resist the temptation to sit with the same friends all the time.

Instead, let's make Homecoming, school lunches and other such gatherings true celebrations by sitting with someone new and celebrating that new and deeper friendship.

If we stretch ourselves in giving the gift of humble hospitality, everyone will have a joyous Homecoming, a cool return to school. And we will have the blessing of new life, born of God's Spirit of fellowship and abundance. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Good and gracious God, you told us from the very beginning that we would live by the sweat of our brow. And, Oh, how interdependent we are in work we do! We depend on migrant workers to harvest food, nursing-home aides to empty bed pans, teachers to form young minds.

We thank you, Lord, for the gifts and talents you have given us, allowing us to earn a living and contribute to society. We thank you for the blessings of tomorrow's holiday, and pray your presence with family and friends gathering in the Spirit of a job well done, a life well lived.

We pray, too, dear Lord, for those who are without work, and for those who have no break from their work. Sustain them in your love, and help us all to realize that our worth is not dependent upon some job, but rather our love of you and our love of neighbor.

We pray for your children everywhere, and especially for those we hold dear and keep in our prayers.

It is in Jesus' name that we pray, using the words that he taught us as we raise our eyes to heaven and our voices in song:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**