

Collins Street Baptist Church
Sunday June 26, 2011
10.30am & 5.00pm

Welcoming Strangers: The Practice of Hospitality

Luke 14.15-24

Over the last five weeks a very committed crew has been meeting here at the church each Wednesday night to study the life of Jesus. Despite the cold and the uncomfortable chairs, about 30 of us have huddled together around the gospels to understand better who Jesus is and what his presence means in our lives. It's not been easy. Quite frankly, Jesus is a deeply troubling character. For all that I have grown to love about him, for all the inspiration I find in his life and teaching, there's no getting around the fact that Jesus makes me shift uncomfortably in my seat.

Most of that discomfort centers around Jesus' attitude to the stranger, his actions and his teaching on the practice of hospitality. I like to think of myself as a hospitable bloke. I can cook and I like people. But when I read the teaching of Jesus and watch him in relationship with others, it's as though my own feeble efforts are exposed under the glare of an unflattering light.

I am not alone. The religious professionals of Jesus' day were equally uncomfortable with Jesus. In fact their discomfort became so pronounced they began looking for ways to get rid of him. First they dismissed him as a glutton and a drunkard. But Jesus could not be dismissed. His actions and words were showing up the bankrupt nature of traditional religion, and those most invested in it wanted him stopped. In his commentary on Luke's gospel, the New Testament scholar Robert Karris has made the assertion that 'Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate.' For the way Jesus ate with others embodied the radical nature of the hospitality of God. It was all too threatening, Karris says, and thus began his journey to execution.

The Context

To see this, we have to understand that Jesus lived and ate in the midst of two cultural contexts: one Greco-Roman and the other Jewish. In both cultures, the dining room table was a marker of boundaries, a way of determining who was 'in' and who was 'out'. In the Greco-Roman context, the table was a marker of **social** boundaries. Greco-Roman society was marked by clear social strata, mostly related to employment and place of residence. Accepted table etiquette was that one never ate with those outside of one's social class. Landowners never ate with labourers. Plumbers never invited accountants for dinner. What's more, people tended to live in neighbourhoods of common industry. At the centre of a city were the rich and influential; at its edges the poor and marginalized; and everyone else somewhere in between. Everybody knew their place and stayed compliantly within it. To do otherwise would be to challenge the very fabric of social custom.

In the Jewish context, the table was a maker of **religious** boundaries. The accepted etiquette of the table was the way by which a good Jew protected his religious standing. At the time of Jesus, there were complex lists or "purity scales" that dictated where one fell in the religious purity stakes. With some 16 levels of purity, at the top of the list were the Priests, Levites and full-blooded Israelite males. At the bottom of the list were the women and those with physical deformities. Of course, the Samaritans and Gentiles did not appear at all. According to the Pharisees, in order to maintain one's place on the purity scale one could never share a table with someone of lesser purity. You simply could not invite just anyone home for dinner on a Sunday, lest your own reputation be compromised.

Into both of these context walks Jesus. In stark contrast to these accepted social and religious norms, Jesus is prepared to eat with anyone, anywhere, at any time. This was not simply a social gaff on Jesus part. It was a premeditated act meant to challenge the exclusivity of common practice and illustrate powerfully the fundamental difference between God's table and ours. Jesus was prepared to eat

with the religious and the non-religious, the morally upright and the bankrupt, the rich and the poor, the Jew and the non-Jew. In so doing, Jesus was declaring that at God's table all are welcome, regardless of race, religious background, class, profession, sexuality, or social position. "Come!" Jesus says, "Eat with me at the table of God."

The Parable

With this in mind, we come to the parable in Luke 14. Here we have the story of a man, or a king according to Matthew's version, who had invited all of society's prominent and reputable people to a great banquet—all of those, we assume, at the top of the religious purity scale, those who lived at the very centre of the city. However, when the servant arrives with the news that the feast is ready, all of the guests give their last minute apologies along with their rather feeble excuses: "Oh no, sorry, I have a field to tend to, animals to look at, a new wife to take care of. I can't possibly come!" Why? It's a free feed, a banquet no less. Who wouldn't want to come? Why would they present such lame excuses? Because as prominent Jews, they had no way of controlling who else would be there, no way of determining the standing of those who would be seated next to them. The risks were simply too great, the sanctity of their own religious purity too valuable to be risked for such momentary returns. "No, sorry, we can't come."

When the servants return with this news, we are told the host is "angry." In response, he commands his servant to go out "into the streets and alleys" and invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind," those at the very edges of the city, those who are at the very bottom of the purity scale, those whose so-called 'deformities' render them 'unworthy' before God. Notably, the host does not invite them only to the doorway where he might charitably distribute some crumbs to these unfortunates; he invites them into the feast. They are his honoured guests welcome at the very centre of his home.

Still, we are told, there is room to spare. The host then directs his servants to go out beyond the city, to the country lanes and byways, to those completely

outside—the aliens and refugees—those who don't even make it onto the purity lists. "Compel them to come," the master says, "so that my house is full!"

According to Jesus, this is the kingdom of God. It's not a club for the well healed. It's not a cocktail party for the elect. It is an open table to which all are welcome, and at which all will be embraced by the host himself. Though this story was disturbingly confronting to the religious people who were listening, this image of God's kingdom as an open table was nothing new. It was the fulfillment of a promise God has made centuries before. It was the prophet Isaiah who foretold a day when God would host a great feast, a wedding banquet, for all the people of the earth. In Isaiah 25:6-8, the prophet says:

On this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

Such is the kingdom of God.

The Implications

This past week, I, along with many others, watched the three-episode documentary on SBS 'Go back to where you came from'. It followed the experience of six ordinary Australians, each with strong views about asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat, as they underwent their own 25-day immersion in the world of asylum seekers, from the hidden slums of Malaysia to the refugee camps of Kenya. It was riveting television, watching the emotional and painful awakening of these people to their own intolerance and racism. But how easy it is to watch others squirm. How easy it is to shake our heads at others who do not have the level of enlightenment that we have. It is the same with this story of Jesus. I may well point an accusing finger at those Pharisees but the truth is there are more fingers pointing back at myself. And as a reader of today's newspaper, I may well despair of the government's attitude to asylum

seekers who come in search of a new home, but what of my life? What of my practice? This commitment to hospitality that so marks the kingdom of God, this hospitality that we are called to practice as followers of Jesus is so much more than inviting someone home for lunch on Sunday. It constitutes a way of seeing the world and of living in it, a way of being in relationship with God and each other. It turns everything upside down.

There are several ways that this story challenges me. Let me tell very briefly what they are. **The first is that my practice of hospitality depends profoundly upon my own experience of grace.** God's directive to the Hebrew people in Deuteronomy 10 that they should love the stranger was predicated on the fact that they knew first hand what it was to be strangers, a people without land or identity. Those in Jesus story had forgotten who they were and where they had come from. Their amnesia was their downfall. In the practice of hospitality I live the embrace of God because I have experienced it. To practice hospitality is to practice humility and to understand the fragility of another as the very same fragility that inhabits my own heart.

The second is that my practice of hospitality has so little to do with borders and barriers and everything to do with inclusion and grace. In Isaiah 54 the prophet calls the people of God to 'enlarge the site of your tent and to let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out.' When every human inclination is to pull down the flaps, zip up the entrance way and protect what is ours, the challenge of Jesus is to act counter intuitively, to open our lives, our homes and our borders to those beyond.

The third is that my practice of hospitality is not first and foremost about intimacy with the stranger but about acting justly and inclusively towards her. As with every commandment to love in the Bible, God's urging to love the stranger is a love of choice and action, not feeling and affection. Very often one will follow the other, but the love of the host in Jesus' story was a love that compelled him to first act inclusively. Hospitality is not about the stranger becoming our best friend, but a fellow human being.

The fourth is that my practice of hospitality is not a means to an end, but one that defines my faith and my life. God forbid that our hospitality should ever be a recruitment or marketing strategy. God forbid that our hospitality should be nothing more than thinly veiled evangelistic ploy. Hospitality is an expression of who we are and whose we are.

The fifth is that my practice of hospitality is about making space for the Spirit of God to be at work. What the Spirit does in that space is not our concern. As Henri Nouwen says, 'Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.' Our task then, just as it was the task of the servant in Jesus' story, is to set the table, open the doors and pull out the chairs. Nothing more, nothing less.