

**A Guest Host
Luke 14: 1, 7-14
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A preacher friend of mine once told a story about his church's efforts to feed hungry people in their community. This was before pandemic days, so the concerns were mostly about how they would sustain the ministry with volunteers, and then, how they would get the word out. They had gotten the meal up and running, worked out most of the kinks, and felt comfortable making other churches aware, so that they could also let people who might need a meal know about this new opportunity to be fed. So they wrote out a blast email to their church partners: "Free meal on Thursday nights!"

A few of the churches wrote back and said, "Can you clarify what free means?"

So much in our lives is contractual, *quid pro quo*, this for that. It was not much different in Jesus' time, and in Greco-Roman culture. If you issued an invitation to someone of higher status than you, and they did you the honor of accepting, then you would need to fawn over them, repaying them in accolades for so graciously accepting your offer. And you might also hope for the chance that you could be invited in return to some minor event at their home. If you invited someone to your table of the same social strata, it was assumed that they were now under obligation to return the invitation soon. And if you gave an invitation to someone of lower status, that person would understand that you probably wanted something from them, that they were going to be indebted to you in some way.

Perhaps Jesus was wondering just why He got this invitation; why He was here, at this house of a prominent Pharisee, and for a Sabbath meal. Jesus almost never refused invitations, He accepted just about every invitation given to Him. The gospel writer Luke had an idea about the Pharisees' motives, by his comment that they, Jesus' host, and those gathered there that night, "were watching him closely."

There could be many reasons why Jesus was invited into the room that Sabbath dinner evening. Were they there to warn Him of growing unrest among those who could lash out? Were they there to record yet another Sabbath-day violation on Jesus' part? Were they there to witness a miracle, to discern whether this Jesus was perhaps the Messiah, the One sent from God? We know that no matter their reasons and what Jesus perceives, they do not stop Jesus from being Jesus the whole night through.

Jesus does not disappoint. At the beginning of this Sabbath evening, in those little verses that we skipped, Jesus encounters a sick man, and heals him. Shocking, but not really, as He has done this before—if you were here last Sunday, Jesus healed a woman in a synagogue on a Sabbath day and a religious leader there called Him out on

it, starting a debate about the true meaning, the divine intentions for the gift of Sabbath. Jesus defends this healing much the same way as He has done before, and according to Luke, the dinner crowd was “silent” in response to Jesus’ reasoning, that Sabbath is made for saving life, for freeing people and Creation from peril and bondage.

But then, and this is where we join the dinner party, Jesus continues speaking, perhaps out of turn. He addresses all the guests. And the first part of Jesus’ advice is not that unusual. It seems to be common sense, good advice for not embarrassing yourself at a dinner party or wedding. Don’t go sit at the reserved tables, the seats of honor, but wait until it is offered to you by the host. Ok, fair enough.

But the second part of Jesus’ unsolicited advice at the table of the Pharisee hosting Him was a critique of the host’s own guest list. Hardly table manners we would teach our children, but then maybe Jesus has figured out that being invited into this room was not a polite invitation, so there is no reason to keep to conventional manners.

Jesus’ next critique is aimed at the host, but really a message to everyone, and a message to us. He addresses the societal expectation that generosity or invitations at some point need to be repaid. This expectation is pervasive, we may feel it within ourselves, maybe without recognizing it. That ancient honor system rearing its head, putting all gifts on the scales. If someone gets me a Christmas gift, oh no, I better have something ready for them. Since he invited me to lunch, I’ve got to remember to treat him next time.

But that is not how the kingdom of God works, Jesus says.

Jesus holds before His host and guests those who are not currently at the table. People who are poor, or blind, or bent over, those who in that time would not usually be persons of any means, any ability to repay an invitation. People who were not generally welcomed to many tables at all. “These persons are who you should invite,” Jesus said, “if you really want to be blessed, if you really want to share in God’s joy.”

It wasn’t that people in that time were against charity. But charity did not extend to invitations to true fellowship or real connection. Jesus’ advice, taken, would not be a good strategy for social advancement, but rather social chaos potentially, in their eyes. You follow some of the advice Jesus is giving here, and it makes you dangerously out of step with the Roman Empire, which required, among other things, like paying taxes, giving proper respect to those due great honor, like local authorities, dinner invitations and otherwise.

But what does this mean for us really? Does this mean that I can’t invite my friends and family, or my new work colleague over for dinner? It doesn’t mean that we turn away from kin and connection with those lasting relationships in our lives. No, but Jesus does open our eyes to the ways that we may use our power of invitation and hospitality in Christ’s name.

When I started college in Iowa, the 18-year-old me looked forward to Sunday mornings where, for the first time, I could wake up and do just as I pleased. I’d been raised in a family where there was no discussion about where we would be at 9:30 am and at

11:00 am, Sunday School and worship. Now, I had no parents waking me up now for the church routine. I had perfect freedom to finally enjoy Sundays!

But God has a sense of humor, and the pastor of the Presbyterian church in town was someone I had already met on my very first day on campus, because he had been one of the community members welcoming us to campus with his spouse, a sociology professor. And it wasn't too many weeks before I realized that Sunday mornings were lonely when your body has been programmed to wake up at 7:00am, hours and hours before your roommates. And so I found myself on a Sunday morning sitting in a pew feeling very alone. Pastor Mike and his spouse Sylvia invited me to lunch that day. And then they lined up other very willing congregation members to invite me and a small handful of other college students over to their homes at least once a month every month for four years. And I couldn't repay. I had little money and no room in the dorm to throw them a feast, and I couldn't adequately express even four years later at 22 just how much it meant to me to sit in a real house, eating non-cafeteria food, with nothing asked of me except my presence. At dinner these faithful church members, upon the gentle prompting of Pastor Mike, shared with us how God had walked with them in their lives. We learned that faithful people aren't perfect, that forgiveness and new life happens in real time, in quiet and often-years-long journeys, and that they were somehow and strangely honored to have us not-quite-grown, fragile-ly confident college students in their homes, these professors, writers, moms, musicians, nurses, retirees, and friends of Jesus.

I learned their secret: while hosting us, they saw themselves as guest hosts. Those people who fill in, Saturday Night Live style, for Jesus, the true Host, sharing a meal they recognized they were only partially responsible for providing. They seemed to know that, as guest hosts for Jesus, they had been given an incredible invitation to share in a few moments, in a simple meal of lasagna and salad, a glimpse of the infinite generosity, great welcome, and healing love they knew in Christ Jesus. And we felt their joy in being able to extend his table to us.

Strangers come in many shapes and sizes and ages. They are sometimes not even obviously lonely or hurting or in need of your hospitality. You don't need to troll the streets at night looking for the most needy, the most hungry, although there are times when we as Christ's disciples can work together to do just that. But fortunately or unfortunately, we need not go far to find someone who is in great need of an invitation. It would be scary for some of us, maybe most of us, to think about inviting total strangers in for a meal. Our households are set up differently than those in Jesus' time. We live in greater isolation, we rarely share common space with extended generations of family and our household employees, we often live alone and we all leave our households empty for great periods of time than people would have in Jesus' day. It would be difficult to think about inviting complete strangers into our private homes without thinking about our safety or the safety of our families.

But does this mean that hospitality is something we as Christians can no longer practice in an amazingly upside-down way? Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room*, talks about threshold spaces, places where we can offer hospitality in a community setting, where we can extend a meal and fellowship to those who cannot repay. There are

other spaces, other ways to show hospitality toward the stranger. A place like this church. Think about our church's building and grounds as a front porch for this community, and communities beyond, it is a great place for us to practice being guest hosts for Jesus. Think about who you might welcome and invite to the Fall Kick-off Celebration in September. An outside event to practice our meeting-strangers skills again, not worrying so much if attendees contribute with faithful church attendance or donations, but an opportunity before us to experience the joy of guest hosting, remembering Jesus' words, "When you welcome someone in my name, you welcome me, and you welcome the One who sent me" (Matt 10:40).

There is an icon in an abbey in Austria that illustrates the holy joy that comes in extending hospitality beyond expected and ordinary guest lists. It is a depiction of some unnamed community, with people doing ordinary things, and there is a table in the foreground. The people at the table look normal, except for one thing. Everyone, those seated and those around in the background, everyone has a halo. All are marked with this circle of holiness. And the title of the icon is "Xenophilia," love of the stranger.¹

What a different way of viewing each other—whether poor, sick, hurt, differently abled, or stranger—not as someone to be feared and handled, but as someone holy, and worthy of an invitation.

What a Christ-like way of looking at our community, our world. What a challenge given to us by Jesus Christ, who sees us and the stranger too as worthy of an invitation not because of what we have done or will do for Him, but because of His love for us. For His invitations are always rooted in God's expansive generosity. The declaration that "They will come from the east and the west and the north and the south." What qualifies us for a place at the table is not how much we can repay in kind. For repayment for all God's blessings and mercy is laughable, how could we do that? Even our hospitality to the poor, to those who cannot repay is not repayment to God. It is a reflection of who we understand God to be, and who we know ourselves to be because of Christ. We are a guest host. For even when we host a meal and welcome others, we are always simultaneously a guest at Christ's table, not through any honor we deserve, but the love that God in Jesus Christ extends to us, no matter our situation or ability to pay, which we cannot.

We can welcome others because we have been welcomed by Christ. It is because He shares so freely with us that we can share so freely. May we see halos everywhere, on everyone, as we give and receive holy hospitality.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

¹ Paul Wadell, *Hospitality*, 75-76.