

The Hospitality of God

Luke 6:17-49

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First Central Congregational UCC
14 February 2016

For today's scripture reading we are rewinding a few chapters in the Gospel of Luke from last week's reading. Today's is set in Galilee near the end of the first phase of Jesus' ministry. Prior to this passage, Jesus has gone up onto a mountain to pray and then selected his twelve core disciples. What follows is Jesus teaching his essential message to his disciples, the Twelve and the larger crowds. We the readers and listeners are included as among the disciples hearing Jesus deliver his core teaching.

[Read Gospel]

Today is St. Valentine's Day, one of those holidays that you either really enjoy or loathe, passionately.

In elementary school we used to decorate boxes for classmates to give us valentines. There was always a lot of pressure to have a well-decorated box and to purchase fun valentine's to give away. And then there was that moment of extreme vulnerability if you gave a particular someone their own special valentine. You waited to see if your sentiments were reciprocated. Lots of broken hearts, of course. Maybe we learned some good lessons and were made stronger through those experiences?

As a single young adult I hated St. Valentine's Day. And so every year I threw a party that only single people were invited to.

Michael and I rarely do much for this holiday, though we do intend to grill some swordfish steaks tonight, and I'm really looking forward to eating those.

Little is known of St. Valentine, a third-century Roman; tradition says he was martyred on this day. As with many ancient saints there are lots of legends, but little left in the historical record. It appears that Geoffrey Chaucer was the first person to associate this day with romantic love, but the modern tradition of gift-giving arose in nineteenth century England.

At its best this holiday celebrates love—romantic love, friendship, even the love between families.

Barb Switzer e-mailed me this week. She was confused about the Lenten theme because the church newsletter said one thing and the website and sign on the corner said another. Darnit, I thought I had caught my error, but clearly I had not. Here's what Barb wrote:

I wanted to let you know that I like the Lenten Theme of Grateful Hospitality. This speaks to me as a reminder that any hospitality I can offer is a grateful response to all I've received.

Related to this, is my confusion. When I followed the link from the Congregationalist, the website article is titled GraCeful Hospitality - it's also what the sign says on the corner. While I also acknowledge that graceful offering of hospitality is well-appreciated (or Martha Stewart would not be so popular), I much prefer the graTeful emphasis.

I don't know which is the correct theme - but that letter change makes a difference in the message to me. Being grateful and offering hospitality feels more humble, and as I said, a response to all I've been so fortunate to receive. Being graceful is lovely, but seems to come from a different frame of mind, of being a little more superior and to have the luxury to offer "graceful" hospitality - unless, of course, we are actually talking about grace-filled hospitality.

So many interpretations - all of them make me think of what I can offer others. Thanks for giving me a good theme to consider during Lent.

"Graceful Hospitality" is the theme that the church staff selected and that we've been planning for, though I've caught myself typing "grateful" more than once. Clearly I did so in the newsletter as well—and none of my proofreaders caught it either!

Yes, grateful hospitality would be a marvelous theme, for all the reasons that Barb states. But that's not the core idea the church staff was drawn to for this year's Lenten worship. We were drawn to the idea of Grace and the Salvation on offer from God and how we might explore that through the lens of Hospitality. Yes, Grace-filled is a good way to think about it. We have joked that because our Advent theme was "Wonderful Expectations," we are really living in a "Year of Fullness," from the Turkey Dinner to Pie Day.

The hospitality we will be focused on is actually God's hospitality, not ours. Though God's hospitality invites us to respond by also being hospitable. After the theme was selected the congregation began working on sponsoring a refugee family this spring, which aligned perfectly with the Lenten theme. Actually, I was having lunch with Pat Lamberty who is chairing that effort—lunch at M's pub, by the way, a week before the fire—and she wanted to know when would be a good time to pursue the refugee sponsorship effort and I said, "Lent. Hospitality is our theme." So not only do we have a worship theme, we have an accompanying service project that will aide us in exploring these ideas for our own lives.

We were guided to this theme by the commentary on Luke written by Brendan Byrne, a Jesuit theology professor in Australia. That commentary is simply entitled *The Hospitality of God*. Brother Byrne writes:

Luke sees the whole life and ministry of Jesus as a *visitation* on God's part to Israel and the world. From the start this raises the question, how will this guest, this visitor, be received? The crucial point is that those who do receive him find that he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality: "the hospitality of God."

So, a good spiritual reflection for you this Lenten season is that question—How will I receive the hospitality of God?

But, before, we get too far down the road talking about our response, let's look first at what we mean by God's hospitality, and for that we turn to today's Gospel passage—the Sermon on the Plain.

We are much more familiar with Matthew's Sermon on the Mount where in a few chapters Matthew has Jesus present all the core teachings of the Jesus movement, teachings that continue to surprise, inspire, and convict us. Matthew situates the moment of teaching on a mountain in order to symbolize Jesus as the new Moses, and Matthew's teaching is more spiritualized, for example he writes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger after righteousness."

Luke's great sermon is shorter and in many ways more forceful and direct. Also more political and economic—"Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry." Which may be one reason he situates the sermon on a *plain*—Jesus has come off of the mountain, which for Luke is a place of retreat and prayer, and now down among the people to speak.

And what radical things he says:

Blessed are you when people hate you.

Woe to you who are rich.

Woe to you who are laughing now.

Love your enemies.

Bless those who curse you.

Do good, expecting nothing in return.

Do not judge.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

I imagine you find more than one of these difficult, perhaps troubling.

When I was pastoring in Oklahoma City, pastoring a predominately LGBT congregation, there was a local state representative who was frighteningly anti-gay. She's still in office and still just as frightening—this session she introduced a bill that would make it illegal for school counselors to provide positive messages to LGBT kids. Fortunately even conservatives forced her to drop that bill. But every year she did stuff like this, and we were constantly having to organize against her legislation.

She and I met on several occasions—we appeared on a television debate show opposite each other, for instance—and were always very polite with one another. I took it as a particular challenge to try to love her as Christ told me to. And I encouraged my congregation to remember: even when she was attacking them, she was also a beloved child of God. My dear, late friend Judge Peter Keltch would respond, "But it's so hard."

Yet that is how broad God's hospitality is—even the people we most dislike are welcomed and included in God's love, even the people who themselves have no interest in welcoming and including others.

The New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson wrote, "Human values are reversed by God not for the destruction of the wicked but for the saving of the lost. God's 'visitation' is for their salvation."

Brendan Byrne writes that "God's aim from the start is to be as extravagantly generous

as possible.” He goes on, “[Jesus] is not laying down maxims to be followed literally. Rather, he is seeking to inculcate a fundamental attitude according to which one would be prepared to be vulnerable to a degree foolish by the standards of the world, because such vulnerability and generosity is what one both discerns in God and experiences from God.”

Paradoxically, that very religious Oklahoma state legislator was lost and in need of God’s grace. I felt it was imperative to offer that to her. When we take the risk to show mercy and kindness to such people, we are actually offering the hospitality of God; we are offering salvation.

That is part of the message of Jesus’ great sermon. The poor, the despised, the outcasts, the most vulnerable in any society are the ones who will serve as God’s agents of salvation.

The final parable of the sermon is a warning—God will move and then only those who have listened to Jesus and responded will be secure. The question to reflect on this Lent is how will you receive the hospitality of God? Hopefully by offering God’s grace to others. In such love and generosity lies our salvation.