

Aloha
Luke 14:15-24
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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For August and much of September our worship series is Peace Works: Summer Camp at First Central. Peace Works was this summer's theme at Kaleo, our denomination's campground in the Sandhills, and so Katie and I have adapted the curriculum for use as our worship series to round out the summer.

Each Sunday focuses on a word or concept from a different culture in order to explore different aspects of peacemaking. And today's word is "Aloha!" A fitting theme for our annual Homecoming Sunday, when we gather for a picnic, music, dancing, and games. This year we have some special camp-related activities planned during the picnic.

Our biblical lesson today is one of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke. The parables are fascinating stories, often with a straightforward first interpretation and then complex, nuanced interpretations when examined more closely. By way of announcement, our Wednesday Night Bible Study this autumn will examine the parables of Jesus. I hope you'll join us for more in-depth conversation about this and other stories Jesus told. Beginning on September 11, we'll have our Wednesday Night Potluck at 5:30 and then begin our Bible Study around 6:05 finishing in time for choir at 7.

Today's parable is about a banquet:

Luke 14:15-24

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him,
"Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

Then Jesus said to him,

"Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.

At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited,
'Come; for everything is ready now.'

But they all alike began to make excuses.

The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.'

Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.'

Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'

So the slave returned and reported this to his master.

Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave,

'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'

And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.'

Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Have you ever visited Hawaii? I've been fortunate enough to visit twice. The first time was the summer after my senior year in high school when my Mom took my sister and me to Honolulu. She and Dad had lived there as newlyweds when Dad was stationed at Pearl Harbor as a sailor in the US Navy. Mom has always spoken with nostalgic longing about her time living in Hawaii, and while we were there in 1992 she had a youth and vitality.

Five years ago Michael and I went to the Big Island to celebrate my fortieth birthday. We went in the middle of an Omaha winter. The day we returned home to Omaha the temperature in Kona was 92 and the temperature at Eppley Airfield was 2.

That trip we were greeted at the airport by Kathy and Gary McConnell who had beautiful leis of fresh flowers and helped us get our luggage and rental car, and settled into our B&B. They welcomed us with a true Spirit of Aloha.

So, if you've been to Hawaii, you know how overwhelming kind and ubiquitous this spirit is.

"Aloha means hello, goodbye, welcome, and love." We know it as a greeting, but the word conveys an approach to life, a spirit of kindness, compassion, and gratitude. According to Pono Shim & Ramsay Taum, Aloha "is a spiritual principle that conveys the deepest expression of one's relationship with oneself, the creative and life-giving forces, one's family and community, and with one's friends and strangers."

Pilahi Paki, who was known as a "keeper of the secrets of Hawai'i" and was the author of Hawai'i's "Aloha Spirit Law," described Aloha by turning the word into an acrostic of other Hawaiian words:

A – is akahai (ah-kah-high), which means gentleness, kindness, caring.
L – is lokahi (loh-kah-hee), meaning unity, harmony, oneness, being of one mind.
O – is 'olu'olu (oh-luh-oh-luh), an expression of cheerfulness brought about by a feeling of pleasantness, kindness, comfort and a positive attitude.
H – is ha'aha'a (hah-ah hah-ah), a word expressing humility and meekness.
A – is ahonui (ah-ho-nuh-wee), which expresses patience, endurance, perseverance

Pilahi Paki worried that in the twenty-first century, the world would be in conflict and would require the Spirit of Aloha of the Hawaiian people.

Hawaiian culture has left a significant mark upon the United Church of Christ. If you ever attend a General Synod, there are always expressions and representations of Hawaiian

culture. This is because Hawaii is one of the places we have many churches and our denomination is strong.

Of course, there is an historical reason for this—Congregationalists missionaries were among the first colonizers of the Hawaiian Islands. One of the sad chapters in our history is the way we participated in conquering the islands, removing the queen, setting up economic exploitation of the people, and attempting to rob them of their culture.

We can hear the pain we caused in the words of Queek Liliuokalani. Please pick up one of the black New Century hymnals and turn to hymn number 580. It is “O Kou Aloha No” also known as “The Queen’s Prayer.” This is the prayer that Liliuokalani wrote while imprisoned. The UCC asks that we only ever sing it in Hawaiian, but the translation into English is printed below:

Your love is in heaven and your truth so perfect. I live in sorrow imprisoned; you are my light, your glory my support. Behold not with malevolence the sins of humankind, but forgive and cleanse. And so, O Lord, beneath your wings be our peace forever more.

In 1993 the United Church of Christ formally apologized for its actions in the nineteenth century, and we sought to make reparations for the harm our predecessors did. In the decades since, we work in a spirit of reconciliation, strengthening our relationships with the Hawaiian culture we once tried to eradicate.

For example, when I was serving as a pastor in Oklahoma City, the Oklahoma Association of the United Church of Christ had an on-going ministry in our state prison system for Native Hawaiians. At the time Hawaii was renting space from the State of Oklahoma for incarcerating inmates. Can you imagine living your whole life on a small Pacific Island surrounded by culture and family and then being sent to prison in rural Oklahoma with no ocean, no tropics, and prohibitively expensive travel for your family to visit you? So, as part of our on-going acts of repentance and reconciliation, the UCC association carried out a ministry with those incarcerated Hawaiians that created time and space for them to practice their culture and spiritual traditions.

The parable I read today is about a great banquet and those who are invited to it. This is a rich parable with a handful of possible interpretations. Today I want to focus on the simplest and most obvious—that this is a story of radical hospitality. Scholar Anna Wierzbicka summarizes the parable’s meaning as “an urgent invitation to a fellowship with God.” The parable then poses a question, “How are you going to respond to the invitation?” For this is an event you don’t want to miss, and if you do miss out from your own failure to respond, you will miss something wonderful and will regret it later. She declares, “God’s dining hall will be full only if *all* people take their places.”

Jesus goes beyond a polite and welcoming meal to a radical, even revolutionary, idea that all of those normally excluded from places of honor and celebration will now be included. Our camp curriculum stated, “The Great Banquet is infused with the spirit of *aloha*.” “This radical *aloha* holds a dynamic energy that makes everyone feel respected, welcomed, and loved.”

On Friday, March 13, 1959, on the occasion of Hawaiian statehood, Rev. Dr. Abraham Akaka, pastor of Kawaiahao Church, delivered a sermon to celebrate the day and in that sermon he spoke of the true meaning of Aloha from a Christian perspective and how Aloha helps us to work for people worldwide.

Rev. Akaka described aloha as “the unconditional desire to promote the true good of other people in a friendly spirit, out of a sense of kinship.” He continued:

Aloha seeks to do good, with no conditions attached. We do not do good only to those who do good to us. One of the sweetest things about the love of God, about Aloha, is that it welcomes the stranger and seeks his good. A person who has the spirit of Aloha loves even when the love is not returned. And such is the love of God.

Akaka described learning about God as a child, “One of the first sentences I learned from my mother in my childhood was this from Holy Scripture: ‘*Aloha ke Akua*’ - in other words, ‘God is Aloha.’”

What does Akaka mean, “God is aloha?” Here’s what he preached that day,

Aloha is the power of God seeking to unite what is separated in the world - the power that unites heart with heart, soul with soul, life with life, culture with culture, race with race, nation with nation. Aloha is the power that can reunite when a quarrel has brought separation; aloha is the power that reunites a man with himself when he has become separated from the image of God within.

And so we understand why in this worship season focused on the tools of peace-making we would turn to this vital Hawaiian idea. Aloha works at making peace. For Aloha is the very power of God’s love at work within us uniting us with one another in a radical hospitality.

Let me conclude by quoting again this morning these words from Rev. Akaka’s sermon:

Let us affirm ever what we really are - for Aloha is the spirit of God at work in you and in me and in the world, uniting what is separated, overcoming darkness and death, bringing new light and life to all who sit in the darkness of fear, guiding the feet of humankind into the way of peace.

Aloha.