

Eating Together, Living Together

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September 2, 2007 Luke: 14 1; 7-14

Jesus said, "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 will be repaid."
 Luke 14: 12

A year or so ago I was thinking about what this church does when you're at your best. I began to jot some of the things down. It made a long list, but all the things on the list came round to the same thing, really: hospitality. Christian hospitality.

That struck me as funny at the time. Hospitality? That seemed like a rather tame thing for a church to be good at, especially a progressive, cutting-edge congregation we sometimes take ourselves to be.

But the list had a lot of things on it, things I was happy about or proud of. At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, here's part of the list.

Making space where people who are new to the city or new to the faith can find community and help create community.

Providing food and food security for families and individuals who are stretched out financially.

Sheltering homeless women.

Sheltering homeless congregations.

Creating safe and fun space for children.

Reaching out to students.

Working to change the United Methodist Church's stand on sexual minorities.

Creating space where Christians and Jews and Muslims can eat together and talk together.

Each of these things is important on its own, these are all good things, but taken together, they look a lot like hospitality. Simple hospitality. Good, old fashioned hospitality, Christian hospitality.

Hospitality. It's very polite. It's a polite word. It isn't very exciting or progressive or cutting edge. But, sorry, it's what we do. When we're doing well. When we're doing the Gospel. When we're doing the faith.

Jesus would agree. There's nothing very exciting or progressive about hospitality, it's just what you do if you want to be faithful to God's vision. Hospitality. And he talked a lot about it.

We have a lot of rules and unspoken guidelines for doing hospitality in our culture, as in any culture. One thing we were taught growing up is that you don't show up at someone's house empty-handed. You bring something. Last week we were invited to visit someone who has this over the top love of peppermint patties. That sounded a little prosaic, but I knew Godiva sold

something peppermint patty-like, and it comes in a nice gold box, so Charlene and the kids agreed to pick some up for us.

They went into the Godiva store and asked, politely, “Do you have those Peppermint Patties?” The woman at the counter looked at Charlene as though she had just landed from Mars. “This is Godiva. We don’t sell Peppermint Patties.” Charlene was nonplussed. “You know, those mint chocolates, they come all wrapped up”—the woman interrupted: “I know what a peppermint patty is!” But Charlene said, well I know you don’t always have these, but they’re wrapped up in green foil and they come in a box...” “Oh,” said the woman. “You mean ‘Mint Medallions.’” So we got some mint medallions to bring with us for our visit.

But you know what? I did a secret taste test. Mint medallions, they’re just peppermint patties in green foil!

In this passage we read today, Jesus is telling us how to behave when you’re invited to somebody’s home. And he’s got advice for hosts as well. He’s going over the invitation list for a party. A luncheon, a dinner party, any party. It’s the first thing you need to worry about when you are putting an event together: who is going to come? Who are you going to invite?

But Jesus’ idea of who to invite to a party is the opposite of ours. Of course it is. Don’t invite your friends, your relatives, your wealthy neighbors. Don’t invite anyone you know. Invite strangers, and strangers who can’t pay you back.

That makes more sense when you think about what the word hospitality means. It comes from *hostis*, the Latin word for stranger. Our word *host* comes from this, too. So, to be hospitable, a host has to look after strangers.

Not surprising at all that the book of Hebrews continues this thought: As Austin read today, it says, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

That’s a strange and wonderful thought; getting away from any Emily Post or Martha Stewart or Rachel Ray idea of hospitality. Still, it sounds a little Hallmark. But the writer of Hebrews doesn’t stop there.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to discuss a couple of groups of people we should show hospitality to: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. Remember those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. That begins to sound a bit less like Hallmark. That begins to sound pretty progressive, maybe even cutting-edge. Maybe even like Jesus.

Remember those in prison, and those being tortured. Should we be reaching out to people held in Guantanamo, then? Maybe, if we can think of ways to do that. But there are people closer to home who are stuck in prisons of one sort or another. There are people suffering many different types of torture, not to use a harsh word too lightly.

And there are plenty of people close to home who are strangers to you. Maybe some in this room. Maybe some whom you work with. Maybe some in your own family; people from whom you have become estranged. So you don't have to go very far away to practice hospitality. You can get pretty good at hospitality without going anywhere at all.

It's not a coincidence that the central gathering point of the Christian faith is around a meal. OK, it's not much of a meal. Just a bit of bread soaked in a bit of juice. It's more like a snack. Think of it as the Lord's Snack if you want to. But in what it says about us, in what it symbolizes about us, it's huge. It's a feast.

It's a meal open to everybody and anybody.

It's a meal where Jesus, literally, is the host. This stranger that we invite into our lives as we bring his body and blood spiritually and symbolically into our bodies.

You can get better food at coffee hour, most Sundays. But in terms of spiritual food, it doesn't get any better than this.

And as far as hospitality goes, you couldn't wish for a better host.