
The Welcome Table

Luke 14:1, 7-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 1, 2013 by the Rev. Luke A. Powery

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” That was almost my sermon title based off of the 1967 film, starring the likes of Spencer Tracy, Sidney Potier, Katherine Hepburn, and Katharine Houghton. In this film, the daughter of a well-to-do white family, Joanna Drayton (played by Houghton), comes home from a vacation to announce her intentions of marrying a well-to-do black physician, John Prentice (played by Potier). The plot thickens as Joanna Drayton brings John Prentice home to dinner to meet her parents who do not know John is black; John’s parents also come into town for the Draytons’ dinner in order to meet Joanna, who they learn is white at the airport. This might not be such a big deal today but in 1967 to present a positive representation of a controversial subject like interracial marriage was bold. Bold because historically interracial marriage was illegal in most states and was still illegal in 17 states until June 12, 1967. This movie presents a cultural taboo of that time and it does so around the dinner table because who’s at the table says something about who’s in and who’s out.

The table is not only where one may say grace; it is the space where one extends grace. Tables in the ancient world were places where philosophers and teachers could impart their wisdom. Tables were also the place where a community’s identity could be marked; a Near Eastern proverb declares, “I saw them eating and I knew who they were,” and this was not necessarily about one’s distinct way of chewing food. One’s eating company says something about you and your company.

To the gospel writer Luke, “nothing [is] ...more serious than a dining table” (Fred Craddock). The Eucharist and revelations of the risen Christ occur there (Luke 24). Jesus promises the Holy Spirit while eating (Acts 1). Jews and Gentiles reflect the nature of the church through table fellowship (Acts 10, Acts 11). The table is taken so seriously that Jesus gets into trouble because of his eating buddies. He was known as a “friend of tax collectors [publicans] and sinners” because he ate with them. Inviting others to a table could be a sign of affluence or status but could also be a sign of service or a sign of acceptance, as equals, creating egalitarian fellowship through the breaking of bread. Table fellowship meant full acceptance of one another and the inclusiveness of Jesus revealed by the company he kept, especially of the socially ostracized, was suspect. People even question Simon Peter when he goes to Gentile Cornelius’ house and ask, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and *eat with them?*”(Acts 11). There could be trouble due to the table because one’s table fellowship does not lie. Going to *the other’s* house was bad enough but to eat at the same table!? The table says something about who’s in and who’s out.

So who’s at the table? This is the most obvious part of this parable in Luke. Jesus begins by teaching guests about table manners. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor...But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place.” Social status was obvious based on the seating of dinner guests and Jesus tells the guests to seek the lower place so that the host may tell them ‘move up higher.’ If you humble yourselves, you’ll be exalted and if you exalt yourself, you’ll be humbled. This story about hospitality involves humility, the humility of the guests.

This is antithetical to how we were accepted into college. You didn’t get in because you majored in humility. We’re advised to put our best foot forward. Highlight our strengths. Talk about our accomplishments and skills. Name our awards. Elevate ourselves to stand out among the many other highly competent applicants. No one emphasizes failures or weaknesses as a means to getting a job or getting into college. The apparent goal is to show that we are at the top of our game, our field, our school. Jesus, however, flips the script by saying one should aim to go as low as one can go.

This humble posture is not just for the guests. Jesus tells the hosts to look low as well. “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 would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you....” Guess who’s coming to dinner? Not your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors. But strangers and the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those from whom we cannot get anything in return for our hospitality, those who have no social or economic status, those who can’t help us get connected to the influential, those who are not the usual suspects around the table of welcome. In the kingdom of God, we see the inversion of hospitality in which those on the margins are placed front and center at the table to remind us that a community is only as strong as its weakest member. Those on the fringes become friends through table fellowship. This ought to be surprising because the kingdom of God is always surprising. In the kingdom, hospitality is free and there is no expectation of reciprocity; it is unconditional service at the table. No strings attached. No stipulations placed on the other.

Only what Yale theologian Miroslav Volf calls “the drama of embrace.” This embrace is “the will to give ourselves to the other and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them . . . prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any ‘truth’ about others and any construction of their ‘justice’.” Hospitality is “creating space” and it “is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place” (Henri Nouwen). The invitation list is already a huge change from the norm because those invited to this table are different from, even strange compared to, the host. But isn’t that what hospitality is—welcome of the stranger? Welcome of difference. Having *the other* at the table.

The tables were turned right here in Durham during the 1960s and 70s as detailed by Osha Gray Davidson’s book, *The Best of Enemies*, in which she tells the story about C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater. Ellis grew up in the poor white section of Durham and as a young man joined the Ku Klux Klan, eventually becoming the Exalted Cyclops of the Durham KKK. Atwater was a single mother and household domestic from a poor black section of town. This book details how these one-time enemies, came together to co-lead an effort to help Durham deal with problems associated with court-ordered school desegregation. These two individuals ultimately became friends and welcomed each other. A glimpse of the kingdom in Durham history.

Having *the other* at the table is not just a nice thing to do. It is the right thing to do. In fact, it makes for a better table. Having people around the table who don’t look like us, act like us, talk like us, think like us, sing like us, dance like us, who are not us, helps us understand the beauty of God a bit better. Difference and diversity undergirds an excellent and broad university education and even a beautiful church community in which distinct perspectives inform and illuminate one another. Heterogeneity is linked to the hospitality of the kingdom. Sameness is not a sign of the kingdom. If all of us were a Miley Cyrus, how would that be the kingdom? We might instead be in a twerk-o-sphere. Nowhere does Jesus say the goal is sameness or a monolithic guest list. Jesus doesn’t even guilt us into meeting the needs of the poor, crippled and lame, but he does say invite them to the table. Have them as part of your community of friends. And you’ll be blessed because they cannot repay you! You’ll be blessed just because they’re around the table and fear of the other will cease. Even though it appears that there might be what is called “the preferential option for the poor,” Jesus is an equal opportunity God because he does not exclude the religious in order to eat with sinners or other outcasts. Remember we are told that he tells this parable while eating a meal with a Pharisee. His love for the poor does not mean he has to hate someone else.

Jesus speaks to everyone, guests and hosts, the privileged and the underprivileged, about the table, about hospitality, because “hospitality,” as one scholar notes, “is the practice by which the church stands or falls”(Arthur Sutherland). It is that important. The table is invaluable and not only who’s at the table, which is pretty obvious, but whose table it really is.

Whose table is it? Hartford Seminary New Testament scholar, Shanell Smith, recently asked, “Whose banquet is it anyway?” This may not be as obvious as who’s at the table. It is not the Pharisee’s table nor is it the hosts’ or guests’ table. It is the table of Jesus Christ, who is both host and guest, the humble and exalted one. This wedding banquet is a feast of the kingdom of God in the kingdom of God. God throws this righteous rave party. The larger literary context of this banquet table is talk about the kingdom of God. This table speaks about the inversion character of the kingdom where those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted, where the last will be first and the first will be last. The kingdom where they will come from the east and the west, the north and south, C.A.R.Y. and Walltown in Durham, to sit at this welcome table. You don’t have to worry about not being invited because God invites everyone to this wedding banquet—NC Central, NC State, Shaw University, Meredith College, Durham Tech Community College, William Peace University, St. Augustine’s College, Wake Tech Community College. Did I forget one? Oh yeah, even the UNC Tarheels! Everyone is invited to God’s table, even our enemies!

That says something about God’s indiscriminate hospitality. God is a host who “hosts us in the world. From our first breath to our last...”(Amy Plantinga Pauw). “This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us....”(1 John 4:10). Always “self-giving and other-receiving” (Volf). A hospitality *sine qua non*. A hospitality that is risky, so risky that in the images of the Last Supper, we see Jesus sitting at a table with his disciples, including Judas Iscariot who would betray him. His caress of love crushed him in the end at the cross. One must remember that this table talk happens as Jesus is headed to Jerusalem where he will be killed, merging hospitality and hostility.

Etymologically, ‘hostility’ is built into the word ‘hospitality,’ thus risk is built into the very fabric of hospitality because it contains its opposite within it. Hospitality comes from the Latin *hospes*, which is built upon two words: *hostis*, which originally meant stranger, an enemy or hostile stranger, and *pets*, which means, “to have power.” Therefore, hospitality, the welcome extended to a guest, is the function of the power of the host to remain master of the premises. The host receives strangers yet remains in control but the strangeness or alterity of the guest nor the power of the host is annulled by hospitality, thus there is still some hostility in all hosting due to power dynamics. This is why French deconstruction philosopher, Jacques Derrida, created a neologism, “hostipitality,” as a way to indicate the potential of hostility within hospitality.

The risk of hospitality causes Jesus to have a run-in with a cross because hospitality says, “let the other come!”(Derrida), whoever or whatever is other. Come, even if that other is unlike me, even the other threatens me harm and might do violence to me. This is what Brother Roger, the founder of the Taizé Community in France exemplified. The Taizé Community is an ecumenical community founded during post-World War II to be a sign of reconciliation between divided Christians and separate people. Every year they welcome thousands of guests, including many young adults, who seek silence, prayer, peace, and community. In 2005, during one of their common prayer services, Brother Roger, who was 90 years old, was fatally stabbed by a woman in the community who they knew was struggling with mental health issues; Brother Roger’s hospitality welcomed the risk of hostility. His hospitality killed him. A community is made vulnerable by being hospitable. It is possible that there might be terrorism at the welcome table—arguments that are never resolved, words that one wishes were never spoken, even betrayal.

Radical hospitality risks one’s life or the way life is in order to experience the kingdom of God. Hospitality may invert things or even convert things. The suffering of Jesus, as an example, is redemptive and purposeful, though his hospitality kills him, affirming what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said—“unearned suffering is redemptive.” Jesus reveals the vulnerable nature of hospitality while revealing that hostility could not hold him hostage forever in a cold, dark grave.

We are not asked to repay God for God’s hospitality, nor could we ever repay him for the gift of life and love. But his hospitality comes with no strings attached. His banquet is free.

Speaking about free, and being at a university with tons of students, it might be important to say something about “free food.” The only issue with that is there is no mention of food at this banquet table. This is a “wedding banquet.” A festive event. People decked out in tuxedos with bowties and fluffy dresses with high heels. Dancing the night away to Elvis music. We know who’s coming to dinner and whose dinner table it is. But we are not told whatsoever what is being served for the meal at the table. We don’t know the menu. A meal without a known menu.

I want to know if shrimp and grits will be served with macaroni and cheese, collard greens, fried tomatoes, fried chicken, beef liver, catfish, chicken and dumplings, black-eyed peas, yam, fried okra, and corn bread. I want to know if there will be North Carolina barbecue (I won’t say from the east or west), or Texas barbecue or Jamaican jerk barbecue. I want to know if there are loco pops for dessert. I know who’s at the table and whose table it is, but what is on the table? I know who’s coming for dinner but what is for dinner?

Perhaps, the lack of focus on food shifts the focus onto the people at the table and that is what is most important. Perhaps, silence about the menu suggests that Jesus is our bread and food at the welcome table thus our needs will be met and it is a call to trust God to provide our daily bread. Or, maybe, just maybe, we are not told what is on the table, because it is an invitation to us to help set the table and serve what we will share together.

Because the food menu is not mentioned does not mean that it is insignificant. Food is important. Just ask our residence food guru, Dr. Jim Ferguson. The lack of mention about what food is on the table gives us freedom to decide what to serve.

What do we serve when we sit together at the table? What will you put on the table this year? This story invites us to help prepare the menu for the welcome table. Luke, the gospel writer, is being hospitable toward us by calling us to participate in this parable, to nudge us to help host others and to participate in and extend God’s hospitality throughout the world and this community by being God’s co-laborers.

We will share food, I’m sure. But what will you share at the table other than food with those who are different from you?

Maybe you’ll exchange new ideas about a social issue or insights into cancer research. Maybe you’ll cooperate and work together on a community service project. Maybe you’ll share an interest in playing a club sport. Maybe you’ll share a love for singing in a choir or dancing in a troupe. Maybe you’ll share friendship with someone whom you haven’t even met yet. Maybe you will give someone an open ear of understanding when no one else will. Maybe you’ll share your hearts with hopes and dreams for the future. Maybe you’ll take the risk and share yourself to welcome someone in order to give them a sense of belonging, to affirm their value, and to assure them that they are loved. Maybe, just maybe, you’ll share more than food at the welcome table and through your hospitality you’ll be blessed.

The menu is clearly not yet set. But the Holy (G)Host has invited all of us to sit at the welcome table, not just one of these days, but today. You may be surprised who’s on the guest list (just look around) and this academic year you may also be pleasantly surprised by what you find served at the table. Bon appetit.