

“The Heart of Hospitality” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
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Text: Luke 14:7-14 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘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, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

I WANT TO TELL YOU A STORY. Phoebe and Carol and Susan will recognize it, for our speaker, Mark Yaconelli told it to us at the Companions on the Inner Way retreat. It’s about his brother. It seems that his brother Trent Yaconelli is a musician here in the Bay Area. One day Trent called his brother and said, "I am going to give a surprise wedding, What you think?" Mark, a Seminary graduate, sputtered, “A surprise wedding, you can’t do that. What’s this about?”

Well, it seems that a member of Trent’s band, Brian, and his girl friend Amy, had lived together for several years. Their families were both rather conservative, disapproving bulwarks, and both had been estranged from their respective families for those same several years. Now Amy was pregnant. They felt ashamed, And their ingrained values and sense of responsibility seemed to require that they get married. Fearful of their families, still terrified of the judgments of their families, they asked Trent to come stand with them at City Hall. It was not a happy occasion.

Trent exclaimed to Mark, “This is not right!” Mark told him to leave it be, you can’t give a surprise wedding. But Trent could not let go of his indignation and regret. His friends deserved better. Their love, which he saw as genuine love blessed by God, deserved better.

So Trent went to work. Neither Trent nor any of his friends had any extra money. But he had in-laws who lived in Napa. The side part of their backyard was a scruffy neglected city block of dirt, and his family said he could use it. It was autumn, and the friends dug and watered and weeded, they planted grass and a lot of spring bulbs. Then Trent went around to the local wineries and restaurants and rental places and stationery stores. And lo and behold, people loved the idea and offered donations of all sorts – finer wines and more gourmet food than they would have thought to buy if they had the cash!

Then he called the parents. First Amy’s. He got the Dad, and with a gulp, he proceeded to tell the father of Amy and Brian’s love, of their pregnancy, and of their shame. Would

they come? There was a long silence. Then Amy's father said, "Not only will I come, I will make sure all her brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles come as well!" The same thing happened with Brian's family.

Finally Spring arrived, all the bulbs came up and the new grass flourished and on the patch of land, a feast was laid out. On the day of the wedding, a group of friends called the couple and told them to get dressed up. Then they kidnapped them – in two separate RV type vehicles. They took them to separate places and put each one literally into a tree and told each to write everything they loved about the other. Then they blindfolded them and led them to the party. When they took off the blindfold, Amy saw her sister, and then her parents. And Brian saw his aunt, and then his dad and mom.

And then the bride was crying, and then her parents were crying, and the groom was crying and the groom's family was crying. And then everyone was crying and hugging and exclaiming. And they had a wedding, using the words that each had written about the other.

This is exactly the kind of dinner party that Jesus was describing in our reading from Luke – a rare party where we come together and do not know who works where or who is partnered with whom or who has achieved what... a party where we simply rejoice in one another; where we gather not to impress one another or to win power struggles; but rather to acknowledge one another, to minister to one another. It is what we do every Sunday, or a least, what we try to do, here at church. It is how the gospel calls us to live.

The passage we read is not just a simple story about table manners, even ones that reach beyond the formal rules of established etiquette -- although Jesus is indeed challenging a cultural hierarchical status quo. We know this because it takes place at a meal. Particularly in the Book of Luke, a banquet is regularly used as an image of the world according to God, and Jesus often makes an important announcement or has a profound experience at the dinner table.

And we know That this is not primarily a parable about feeding the poor and less fortunate, although that is there as well. This parable is written in the subjective tense, the mood of possibility, the hope of what life could or should be like. And it uses the second person singular pronoun, YOU. It is addressed specifically to each individual listener, then and now.

This is a lesson about being in community. It is a parable about hospitality: God's hospitality to us, and ours to one another. Now, don't be confusing hospitality with entertaining ... Entertaining says, "Come to my house; admire my possessions; see the beautiful way the table is laid. Enjoy the scrumptious food that has taken me all week to prepare. See how perfectly neat and tidy and clean my house is. Come and listen to my views and thoughts." Entertaining is hard, stressful, because through it we perpetuate the myth that we are perfect. We put up a facade saying that we manage our lives perfectly, that we are talented and gracious, and that our children are perfectly disciplined and obedient. Hospitality is the simple intention to make another person feel comfortable, welcomed, embraced, and loved, no matter what their circumstance.

The word shares its root with "hospice" and with "hospital." The one means "shelter" and the other means "a place of healing." Indeed, It is often said that church is not a country club for saints, but a hospital for sinners.

Both Trent's story and Luke's story remind us that our God is not in the business of giving rewards. God is in the business of redeeming, of making the broken whole. Where we are poor, God wants us to say so. Where we feel maimed, God waits for us to ask for help. Where we cannot walk in the paths God has set for us, God invites us to pray. God's truth is that there are no throwaways when it comes to human beings. Everybody is worthy of attention and greeting.

Every Sunday is a garden party to which Jesus invites us -- but not as privileged elite, but as persons in need. In unwavering faithfulness to us, God goes out to the highways and byways where we live. He goes inside of our hearts, beyond the fences we put up. There, at the core of our hearts, God says, "Come to my banquet. Yes, I have a cross for you, but I have resurrection, too. I know your eyes grow dim, your hearts falter and your legs give way in fear, but I am with you. I am at your side and I will be with you until the end of time. Come and be nourished at my banquet."

Implicit in such hospitality is the presence of humility, that peculiar notion of being right sized – not larger and more important than you are, nor smaller and less significant than you are. You no longer need to be the smartest or the dumbest or any other "est." You simply need to be the "me" God created you to be. Humility, and thus true hospitality, is knowing that God is the do-er not us; it is giving up center stage, and relying on God. Humility is the opposite of pride. It is the ability to take God's love in, deeply and truly, and then pass it on to others. And that is what we are doing here in church. That's why we come together each week and create a trustworthy caring community.

A hundred years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson noted three qualities he deemed marks of true "success": the ability to discern and appreciate beauty, the ability to see the best in others, and a commitment to leaving the world a better place. Notice that Emerson does not say that success comes in having the best seat at the table, acquiring more material possessions, or in belonging to the best clubs. Emerson contends that success comes with appreciating God's world, developing loving relationships with God's people, and with working to improve God's world. Jesus would agree heartily.

The heart of hospitality is to know that it's more important to respond to God than to make the right impression on your friends. And therein is freedom, even joy. This gospel is about God's choosing to honor us as a matter of God's own amazing grace. It is about God's sheer joy in loving us because it is God's privilege to do so. God is not big on social graces, but God deals with us graciously so that we may live graciously with others, and in so doing, bring honor to God!

May it be so.