



THE INVITATION

Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 14:1,7-14

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Let's imagine that the time has come to make up the guest list for the wedding. The families agree on the number of guests to be invited. Then the process of weighing the invitations begins. At first it is easy: the close families on both sides, attendants and their families, friends of the parents and the couple, and close business associates. Then it gets harder. What about the cousins in California? If we invite the Bradley's, then we must invite the Taylor's. The guest list begins to expand. Before long, the budget is blown. We haven't even touched the sensitive subject of the seating at the tables. Wait a minute! I thought we were talking about having a "simple wedding." What begins as a joyful experience soon becomes something that takes on a stressful life of its own. Do all wedding preparations end up with wrangling about the guest list and places at the table?

So that we might have a glimpse of life in the kingdom of God, Jesus talks about guests and the hosts from quite another angle.

First, Jesus looks at the banquet from the point of view of the invited guests. When we are invited to a banquet, instead of scrambling for the best seat, we are to take the least place and perhaps be invited by the host to sit in a place of honor. In other words, we come to the feast not because of our own merit, but by the gracious invitation of the host. John Calvin frequently spoke of God as the fount of all goodness. Everything in the Christian life depends upon God's grace. The Reverend Doctor Allan Boesak, a leader of the Reformed Church in South Africa during the struggle to end apartheid, often spoke of God's "reckless abundance." God sows the seed of the gospel everywhere so that all might respond to the invitation. God invites everyone; too often we pick and choose about who is welcome to feast at *our* table. We forget that we come to the feast because of the generosity of the host, not because we deserve a place at the table.

In the small country church that Bunny and I served, a strain of entitlement ran through the church. There was a sense that the good people were in the church and the bad people were outside the church. An elder, who led the choir and taught an adult Sunday School class, had a gift for raising the hackles of the class when he challenged the prevailing notion that the good church folk deserve God's favor. He used to say that the only difference between the people in the church and the people outside the church is that the folks in the church know they are sinners.

Make no mistake about it. We are here by God's grace and God's grace alone. King David prays for the Lord not to remember his sins, but to treat him according to the God's steadfast love and mercy. When we know that our standing before God depends on God's grace alone, then we let go of our pretense and pride, our illusions about our goodness and greatness, and our grasping for place and position. We are led in the path of humility. David declares:

God leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness. (Psalm 25:9, 10)

David pleads for a teachable spirit. It is hard to be humble when we think we know everything there is to know, when we think we deserve our place in the kingdom, when our way is the only right way, and when we think we are six feet above criticism. David learns humility – sometimes the hard way. When we are open to God’s way, we find our true footing – our standing in grace.

The English slave trader John Newton was brought to faith in Christ through a terrible storm at sea. Later, through illness, he came to a full understanding of the gospel and rejected the evils of the slave trade. Brought to his knees by the grace of God and by God’s grace he became a powerful preacher of the gospel. Of course, we know him for his famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, which we will sing today. One verse declares:

*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;
Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far and Grace will lead me home.*

When he was 82 years old, John Newton said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

Jesus also looks at the banquet from the point of view of the host. We are not only guests; we are also hosts. We are those who have received grace and those who extend God’s grace to others. Jesus says, “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” (Luke 14:13, 14). We who have received the hospitality of Christ extend that hospitality to others. Jesus reminds us that the true meaning of Christian hospitality is not about entertaining family and friends, but about welcoming those outside our normal circle into our circle of care and concern. When Jesus gets into our lives, we learn that the Christian life is not only about receiving, but also about giving.

The church I served in Indianapolis had a large food pantry. Members of the congregation joined together to create a community garden on the church grounds where volunteers grew vegetables to provide healthy fresh food for our pantry. There were also members who had their own gardens and grew vegetables for the pantry. They gave the good fruits of their labor because they had received the goodness of God.

The doors of our church are open to everyone, but I suspect that each one of us has a little bit of work to do in opening the doors of our hearts to those whose ideas, backgrounds, life experiences, and ethnic backgrounds are different from our own. Even in the church we tend to gather with folks like us. It’s comfortable; it feels good; and it’s easy. But I am not sure it is God’s way. If we only gather with people like us, we may be missing out on one of the most important ways God has of making us more like Jesus. God meets us in the stranger whose ways of thinking and doing make us uncomfortable. We are like precious stones that need to be polished in a tumbler with other types of precious stones until we shine.

I remember hearing about a visiting preacher who was giving a series of sermons at a local church. While he was there, some of the members said that they wanted him to visit two remarkably loving churches. The first church was a large, wealthy, mainline suburban church. The people said, “See how much these folks love each other. The Holy Spirit is really present in this church.” The other church was an inner city, Pentecostal storefront church. The people said, “Isn’t it

amazing to see how much these people love each other. You can feel the Holy Spirit at work here!" After visiting the two churches, the preacher said, "It doesn't take the Holy Spirit to get people who are like each other to love each other. If you could get those two churches together and get the people to love and care for each other, then you would see the Holy Spirit at work."

Dr. Christine Pohl of Asbury Theological Seminary has written a book on Christian hospitality entitled, *Making Room*. Pohl writes, "Hospitality is central to the meaning of the gospel" (p. 8). Christian hospitality is rooted in how God has welcomed us and how God has provided for our needs. The people of ancient Israel knew that they had been strangers who wandered the earth and they had a special calling to practice hospitality toward strangers. Just as God fed them with bread in the wilderness, so too were they called to share their bread with the poor. In gratitude to God, they cared for the weak, the poor, and the resident aliens. In the life of Jesus, we see how he was both host and guest. He extended hospitality to strangers, and he received the hospitality of others. He fed the hungry multitudes and ate in the homes of known sinners." Pohl notes that one of the New Testament words for hospitality means "the love of the stranger." (p. 31) The death of Jesus on the cross for our salvation is the ultimate symbol of God's hospitality. Through his saving death, we are welcomed into the Kingdom of God. Therefore, Paul says in Romans 15:7, we are to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us.

Each one of us here could testify to how God has blessed us through the experience of practicing hospitality by visiting in nursing homes, volunteering at the hospital, teaching children, serving as Stephen Ministers, taking communion to the farthest pew, or going on a mission trip. We can never overestimate the power of simple acts of hospitality practiced in a spirit of faith, hope, and love. When we take the time to get to know someone we do not know, open our hearts to one another, and welcome that person into our community of faith, we are certain to meet Christ.

Jean Vanier, the Catholic priest who founded the worldwide L'Arche communities that care for people with severe developmental disabilities, has written, "Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share." (Community and Growth, quoted in *Making Room*, p.160).

We are all guests who have responded to the gracious invitation of Christ. As his guests, we become the hosts who go out to invite others. God in Christ has welcomed us, so let us welcome one another.