

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Hebrews 13: 1-3; 5-7

Luke 14:1-14

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.”

I think it is not by chance that the word “invited” appears four times in Luke’s fourteenth chapter. The story of Jesus’ invitation to dinner prompts four stories having to do with hospitality at the table that is God’s. Three of those stories are on our plate this morning.

To begin, it is worth noting that “hospitality” is, in and of itself, a loaded word. If translated literally, it means “love of a stranger.” But daring the deeper waters of its meaning, you discover that the Latin root—*hospes*—is built on two words: *hostis*, which takes stranger to mean enemy; and *pets* which means “to have power.” According to Samuel Wells, once Dean of Duke Chapel and now Rector of London’s St. Martin’s in the Field, “...‘hostility’ is built into the world ‘hospitality.’” Put another way, “risk is built into the very fabric of hospitality because it contains its opposite within it.”

What struck me this week, in a way it never had before, is the inherent vulnerability of both host and guest occasioned by an invitation. There is the vulnerability that finds the host exercising power over the guest, the stranger, in order to be hospitable; and there is the vulnerability that finds the guest defensive, even distrustful. This is so in nations accepting the homeless tempest tossed and this is so when we answer the doorbell. Hostility prowls in the shadows of every invitation dared and accepted.

Precisely for that reason, the dinner party in Luke’s fourteenth chapter is one that I am glad to have missed. According to Jewish and Greco-Roman dining conventions, the host invites only those who have the power either to maintain or enhance his own social standing. On this night, Jesus appears to be the one exception. Following the synagogue service, he enters the Pharisee’s house only to find himself joined for the meal by a handful of his critics. Pharisees, one and all, they are portrayed in Luke’s Gospel as men who are concerned about what one eats and with whom. Experts in both the written and oral laws of Moses, they were also authorities on matters of honor and shame, social roles that were played out endlessly around the dining room table. Why, then, would Jesus have been invited? Because he was a teacher of renown? Or was he a pilgrim to whom hospitality is owed? Luke simply mentions that these men were watching Jesus closely. From the first sentence, you get the feeling that Jesus, the stranger, is being set up by his host, a leader of the Pharisees, the one with power, a member of the social elite.

Immediately and as if on cue, a man bloated from dropsy—what we know as congestive heart failure or liver failure, but what the ancient world deemed a sign of sin—a bloated man shows up and stands right in front of Jesus, threatening the ritual purity as well as the honor of the company about to sit down to dinner. Maybe the man appeared because he had heard of Jesus’ power to heal; or maybe the man was a covert plant who had been told to appear in order to see what this strange guest would do.

In either case, the hostility in hospitality must have been palpable. Were I in Jesus’ position, I think I would have said to the man with dropsy, “How about the two of us leaving and getting a bite at the local bar?” But instead, in the presence of this powerless outcast and surrounded by the presumed power of the host and his religious colleagues, Jesus initiates the evening’s conversation by asking the question that was on his host’s mind: “Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath or not?” Now, it seems, Jesus is watching those who accepted the invitation in order to watch him. Silence hangs in the air, the kind of silence you can cut with a knife, the kind of silence that comes from holding your breath to see what happens next.

What happens next is God’s promised future glimpsed, God’s power made manifest in the redemption of a human life. The man is healed and sent on his way. But what also happens next is the first reversal of many in Luke’s fourteenth chapter. The strange guest becomes the host, who proceeds to extend an invitation himself: he invites the rest of the party to see in such a way that they too may be made whole. Bloated with their own status and right-ness, what they thought they had just witnessed was the breaking of a Sabbath law; what they, in fact, missed was the healing and redemption of a sinner like themselves. So Jesus, the host in God’s kingdom, invites them to behold God’s future crashing the party. In order to open their eyes anew, he appeals to their own compassion for a child or an ox drowning on the Sabbath, an apt comparison to God’s compassion for a man drowning in bodily fluid. Again, they are silent.

Here a second definition of hospitality might help our eyes to see what is happening in these stories and in our presently broken lives. The definition is from a book entitled *Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen, words first published forty years ago that sound downright prophetic when traced over our presently inhospitable common life. Nouwen writes of the mid-seventies: Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to property and inclined to look at the surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But,” reminds his Christian readers, “our vocation [as followers of Jesus is] to convert *hostis* into

*hospes*, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.

Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines....The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free: free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances....”

Because God’s kingdom has crashed the party of the Pharisee in this stranger turned host, the original host and his guests now find themselves to be strangers in God’s kingdom, threatened guests who have unwittingly been ushered into the host’s home where the rules they knew by heart no longer avail. We watch as the host at the table in God’s kingdom attempts to convert *hostis* into *hospes*, the enemy into a guest. His questions means to offer them a space where they can enter and discover themselves as created free.

In response, and as though they had not even heard Jesus’ question, had not paused for a moment to consider their own capacity for compassion, they begin to choose the places of honor at the table. In other words, they begin to take their place in the present order of things. Jesus is watching them. With the invitation implicit in his question refused, he invites them to enter the space created by a story. He tells them a parable. He tells a story about life lived under God’s reign.

I think the radical upending of social norms in this parable is difficult for us to grasp. The only analogy that comes to mind is, of course, borrowed from a ring in our current political circus. It is as though Jesus had been invited to a Hollywood fundraiser for the Clinton campaign. He takes the microphone and begins to tell a story about refugees showing up to a \$100,000 a plate dinner. Unimaginably, the hostess invites them to join her at the head table while Cher and Barbara Streisand and the CEO of Goldman Sachs to slink away to Table 34. Actually, the analogy is not so far-fetched. Like the dinners that presently infect our common life, the dinners in Jesus’ time were all about patronage and prestige. Apparently the guests that night and we in this age like it that way as, for two thousand years, we have continued to scramble for the places of honor.

Undeterred, Jesus also invites the original host of the evening to enter a space that would set him free from having to uphold his own honor. When you are the inviter, Jesus says, invite only those who have no chance, even in hell, of repaying the favor. To us he says: invite the refugee who has just washed up on the shore, the kid who has spent his last stolen dollar on a bag of heroin, the mother evicted from her apartment because she lost her job when her child fell ill and they had no health insurance. Invite the beggar on Walnut Street leaning against the Stuart Weisman store and his dog, the miner forgotten in a holler of West Virginia whose lungs are black as coal, the prisoner picking up trash on I-95, the child about to be deported and her parents bent over from picking the vegetables you will be serving, the terrorist just released from Guantanamo.

But invite them not for the charity recipients that they appear to be in this present order: invite them for the angels they are in God’s order, sent to you by God for your own redemption. Welcome the stranger in all vulnerability because only in this undefended way will there be space for the other. Serve the stranger not in order to earn a star in your crown but take the stranger into your imagination, breaking bread with “those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you *yourself* were being tortured.” To repeat: only in this way does God make space in you, space in your heart for the other to discover the freedom to sing her own songs, speak his own language, dance their own dances. Only in this way does God usher you with them into the space where love reigns.

The church is supposed to be that space on earth, the place where we practice living as if God were the host and we the guests without distinction; the place where we demonstrate to the world the joyful reversal of human ordering; the community where the first are last, the rich become poor, where there is no Jew or Greek, no male or female hierarchy, no slave nor free, but all are one in Christ. But Jesus is watching us and knows we refuse his invitation to change as vigorously *in* the church as we do beyond her doors.

The good news can therefore, only be this: God in Christ became a vulnerable guest in the world as we have ordered it, humbling himself so that, through him and in him, our vulnerability humanity might be exalted. He became the Almighty powerless host whom we can never repay for the love he has lavished on our poor, crippled, lame and blind selves. He is the space God has created eternally in his love for the whole human running race.

“We saw the stranger yesterday,” goes the ancient Celtic rune of hospitality. “We put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place, and with the sacred name of the triune God, he blessed us and our house, our cattle and our dear ones. As the lark says in her song, ‘Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.’” Guess who’s coming to dinner! Thanks be to God.