

“Heart and Hospitality”

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14 – Tesa Hauser
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be encouraged to show love to our neighbors and strangers we meet. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When I was in seminary, I was a hybrid student, which meant I was doing school off campus but was required to attend intensive classes for a week at the beginning of some semesters. I went to Claremont School of Theology, situated 2 hours from my home in San Diego. I would stay with a friend in Costa Mesa, about an hour's drive to save some time and money. One semester I had to stay up there for two weeks and didn't want to bother my friend for two weeks, so I was going to rent an Air-BnB for the second week, which as a young seminarian, was money I didn't want to spend. There was a peer I had met once or twice before, and I knew she lived on campus. We were strangers, but after reaching out, she agreed to have me sleep on her couch for a week.

After one week of sleeping on her couch, we became good friends. I didn't know what to expect, but I didn't expect us to have so much in common and become as close as we did as if we had known each since we were young. I've never asked her why she agreed to let me sleep on her couch, but I'm so glad she did. I think of that week fondly, making meals together, laughing, crying, and sharing deeply about our faith and lives as seminarians.

So, what does it mean for the church to be a place of hospitality or a people of hospitality? For God's people to live out the message in Luke and Hebrews? In Luke, Jesus turns notions of hospitality, power, and community onto its head. He receives an invitation to join a meal party at the house of a prominent Pharisaic leader; this is not the first time this has occurred. As the first verse suggests, they are keeping their eyes on Jesus, who will, in turn, keep his eyes on them.

In those times, meals were used to advertise and reinforce social hierarchy. The host is of high status; therefore, his guests were also. Jesus is invited so that they can keep an eye on him and, or they acknowledge his position as a teacher in the community. Seating mattered as well, where one sat pertained to one's status in the group and society. Reciprocity also mattered; what a guest could provide to the host in return mattered.

Jesus' suggestion is not one merely to religious leaders in this story or specific to actions within the religious community. As one commentary I read, Jesus is confronting the "familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous narrative." We can hear Mary's song from Luke 1:51-52 in Jesus' reimagining of the dinner scene.¹

¹ *"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."*

This situation Jesus shares in Luke is also scandalous today. Radical hospitality in this Lukan story is to humble oneself and provide to those in need with our resources. We are called to open our hearts to the marginalized in our communities and the world, using the access, resources, and power available to us to those who can't repay us. Again, this means using resources, time, and energy with no explicit "reward" or return. The "humble" who are viewed of low birth, low or no status, no family name, or wealth, in Jesus' reimagining is the most valued.

To wonder if good status or wealth is the issue is not time well spent; it is wondering if those things drive our hearts and values. It's asking what we are doing as Jesus' followers with what we have. Are we hoping to be radically hospitable to our neighbors and strangers? Are we following the example of the Acts community who had things in common so that no one was without – sharing of resources, wealth, and power? It is a radical imagining of Christian living, but it's the essence of a life following Christ, as seen in the scriptures.

It's seeing people and creation as the beloved children of God. That is radical in a society that emphasizes power, wealth, and individuality above all else (nothing new under the sun). Radical is the community who knows Jesus because they know Jesus cares about those without power and wealth, those who are seen as humble and lowly. It's as the humans recognizing that our earth deserves care

and compassion as well, the rocks, mountains, and streams that do not have a voice but echo and which we share in the creation of the loving, caring, God.

It's a radical shift of opening our hearts to radical hospitality as the church of Jesus Christ. Hebrews says it though the Jesus at the dinner with the Pharisees is the same today who calls us to act, extend the love of Christ, beyond the four walls – the outcast, the lowly, the humble, to creation – as a community. So how do we show radical hospitality? I think it is two-fold for our community simultaneously; to build community and do the work asked of us in Hebrews. There is a level of trust and companionship underlying the community the preacher is speaking to in Hebrews. The early Christian movement practiced fictive kinship. Many didn't have a family once they proclaimed Jesus, and though this doesn't happen as much today, what is created in a congregation is a bond that mimics familial ties and "serve to broaden mutual support networks, create a sense of community, and enhance social control".

It doesn't take much to be a radical community; asking questions you had never asked before; at the coffee hour, moving from "how are you?" and "How is work?" to "How do you feel supported currently in your life?" or "Who had an influence in your life, and why?" It includes radical listening, where we listen to respond but hear people and see them for who they are. Not every encounter or conversation has to be like this or include deep emotional or spiritual questions,

but conversations that move beyond acquaintance in Christ to a friend in Christ. We are siblings in Christ, but familial friendships require effort and nurture. It moves from being connected through Vista La Mesa to having a connection at Vista La Mesa.

The second part is making an impact on the community of La Mesa, San Diego, and beyond. Our events and money impact our community and the wider denomination, which takes what we give and help those beyond the church. However, what Hebrews is mentioning about hospitality goes beyond giving. The translation misses the wordplay in Hebrews 13:1-2; *philadelphia* is used to describe the mutual love and relationship to another, and *philoxenia* is used to describe hospitality to strangers. Philoxenia is extending familial love and care toward those who are unfamiliar. It's not a matter of simple charity or politeness but extending the community we've created, our heart, outwards to those who "are not like us."

This is what Jesus is telling the Pharisees in Luke. We can build and have our communities, but how does it live out the gospel? Philoxenia is an extension of koinonia, of that community building. Going beyond our comfort and expectations to the stranger who may live, think, and love differently than we do. We build community by getting to know one another, and we love Jesus, not just in thought

but in action. To those in prison and being mistreated, we are to act “as though you yourselves were in the body,” the literal translation of Hebrews 13:3.

We provide meals to those who are dealing with house and food insecurity; we acknowledge our immigrant siblings fleeing from dangerous situations; we see them and know Jesus cares about them. It may take some creativity to find out what hospitality looks like for the community at Vista La Mesa but to be clear: we are not saviors to strangers by helping them or being hospitable. We aren't looking to change them and have them fit our molds or ideas. No, we are the church simply when show hospitality and expect nothing in return.

Hospitality may sound or feel daunting, too big for a small congregation on the corner of Massachusetts and University in La Mesa, CA. This work is evolving and growing and changing; it is work done now and not yet. It is being done by Christians in our neighborhoods and around the world in their context. This work has been done by Christians in the past and Christians now, who we look to as examples and models for what we can do. We know those people in the faith that have modeled and exemplified Jesus' love in the world and inspired the community to move beyond the four walls of the church. There are examples of people in our lives who loved Jesus and loved others so well that we know it is possible.

We were strangers to God at one point and to one another. The hospitality of Jesus and God's people is why we may still be here today. Radical hospitality

confronts the rules, structures, and hierarchy and reminds us that people and creation matter more to Jesus. Let our hearts be moved and live as a community in this truth of hospitality. Alleluia and Amen.