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"Hospitality
Jeremiah 2:4-13 Luke 14:1; 7-14 Hebrews 13:1-8

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH 2:4-13

Jeremiah continues his warnings to God's people about the consequences of deserting the life giving waters of God for cracked cisterns in the desert. Hear Jeremiah's warnings to them as ones for us as well from Jeremiah 2:4-13.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 14:1,7-24

The setting for this story is the home of a prominent Pharisee. Jesus is attending a dinner party and he notices how the guests are vying for the seats of honor. Jesus decides this is a good setting for an object lesson about humility and hospitality. Will you please stand for the reading of the gospel of our Lord from Luke 14:1;7-14.

Let us pray. Lord we are truly humbled by the example you set for us-humbling yourself and taking on the form of a servant, who came not to be served but to serve. Help us to see ourselves in the same light and called to the same calling. May your words sink in and shine forth through us through the way we live in response to this your word. Amen.

One day three C.E.O's were defining status. One said, "Real status is being invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President." Another replied, "No. You know you've arrived when you've been invited to the White House for a conversation with the President and the hot line rings, and he just looks at it and decides not to answer it." The third executive said, "You're both wrong. Real status is when you're invited to the White House for a conversation with the President, the hot line rings and the President answers it and says, 'Here, it's for you.'"

Jesus doesn't care how much status you have in the eyes of the world. What Jesus cares about is if you love your neighbor. Are you generous with those in need? Are you willing to reach out in love to those who cannot help themselves? Are you willing to take a back seat?

At the 50th birthday party of the United Nations the organizers for the dinner party that opened the celebration faced an almost impossible task: preparing a meal for sixty-five heads of state and their entourages that was fitting for those dignitaries, and yet non-offensive to all cultures represented. This meant no shellfish, no pork, no beef and no sauces that involved alcohol. They could not afford for a dignitary to take religious or cultural offense at an ingredient in a hors d'oeuvre. It also meant no white flowers on the tables, because some Asian cultures associate white flowers with mourning. The caterer had to make sure there were as many as three waiters for each of the 65 tables, so that every head of state could be served at exactly the same time.

In Jesus' time, being "the best" meant playing a skillful game of patronage and power. Virtually every relationship was played out with the same self-promoting intentionality and intensity as a twenty-first century political fund-raising dinner. Everyone who buys a place at a \$1,000 a plate fund-raiser for a political candidate knows they were not invited to attend because of their table manners or table skills. The candidate knows that those who buy a ticket eventually expect to get more for their money than rubber chicken.

The Gospel reading here, as well as the other reading from Hebrews set before us a vision of a common ministry that all of us can be a part of. It's the ministry of hospitality.

At the reception following Tad Patton's Memorial service we gathered in the Fellowship Hall. The Member Care Committee was in full force, pouring out their famous Presbyterian Punch and goodies for 150 guests. They were exercising their ministry of hospitality.

Let's look at this concept of hospitality. Both of our passages from the New Testament remind us not to set ourselves above other people. When we are together as the people of God, we ought to give place to one another." Hebrews charges us to "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters... Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

Jesus' parable is about the seating arrangements for wedding guests. On the surface, it is a story about good table manners at a wedding. But its deeper purpose is to remind you and me that in the family of God about our calling is to be genuinely hospitable to one another. In the background looms the even brighter message about God's hospitality to each and every one of us (sinners that we are!), a hospitality which God showed us in the ministry of God's own son, Jesus.

Jesus warns us that if you immediately claim a place of honor at such a gathering, you need to be prepared to experience some embarrassment should a more honored guest arrive and is ushered to your seat, and you are forced to take one of the undesirable spaces at the back of the hall. Jesus goes even further to challenge his hearers by saying that if you want to be truly hospitable when you give a luncheon or dinner, you ought not to only invite your same old friends all the time but rather people who could never repay you, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Jesus is building a case here that there are no throwaways when it comes to human beings. Everybody is worthy of your attention and greeting. There is no one who doesn't deserve your hospitality and mine. In fact, as our passage from Hebrews points out you are taking a real chance when you slight certain people; they might just turn out to be angels!

Last Friday was National Dog Day. I'm sure some of you saw pictures of favorite best friends. I saw a post of a cat with the caption, "There better be a National Cat Day coming."

Edward Bowen tells about a minister in Scotland who was concerned that so many stray dogs were being put to sleep. So she invented a new breed of dog, complete with registration papers. She didn't want any dogs to spend their lives being called mongrels. She determined that her puppies would be the first in a new breed, a breed she called the Newtonmore Haggishound. She now offers membership in that breed to other dogs. Apparently the only qualification to be a Newtonmore Haggishound is that you must be a dog, although the minister was considering extending honorary membership in the breed to cats as well. No longer mongrels; now they are Newtonmore Haggishounds.
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On Saturday October 1st we will extend our ministry of hospitality to include our furry and feathered friends when we host a "Blessing of the Animals." Rev. Dr. Richard Kleiman will be our guest blesser for the event as I will be recovering from my knee replacement surgery that week. Maybe in addition to blessing the animals that come to our campus he could bestow some Certificates to some more Newtonmore Haggishounds. Maybe there might be some cats who could also be Newtonmore Haggishounds.

What is this ministry of hospitality? Let's look more closely at this word "hospitality." Before we look at its literal meaning, we need to point out that there is a difference between hospitality and entertaining. A psychologist put it this way: "Hospitality must not be confused 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."

An even deeper meaning of the word "hospitality" comes when we realize that this word comes from the same source as two similar sounding words, "hospital" and "hospice." The word "hospital" means "a place of healing." The word "hospice" means "shelter." We need to ask ourselves, Do my words and deeds promote a sense of healing for other people when they are around me? "Do my words and actions provide a shelter for other persons when they are around me?"

For a moment, let us push the word "hospice" to its limits. We are aware that today, in our culture, the word "hospice" refers to a special kind of care or place meant for people who are dying. People with terminal illnesses receive hospice care.

In the church we need to remember, as we deal with one another -- with fellow church members, with visitors, with other folks from the community -- that there may be among us those who are dying!

Last Friday I attended a memorial service for a friend who was a marathon runner who dropped dead in his kitchen of a heart attack at the age of 60.

From the moment we are born we begin the process of physically dying but there are some of us who are emotionally and spiritually dying. Some are dying just to know someone and be known. Some are dying to feel connected. Some are dying to be affirmed. Some are dying to be touched, even if only by eye contact, or by some word of

acknowledgment from another human being. All these people need hospice care—need shelter from the storms of life. They need a place of shelter, no matter how fleeting, where they can catch another breath of air. They may not even realize it but they need the hospitality that the church can offer. My friends, the church is not a country club for those who think they are righteous. It's more like a hospital for sinners who know that they aren't."

Yesterday Glenn Whitcomb and I attended the "Let's Talk Again" forum at the Tejas Room of the Baytown Community Center. I had hoped more of you would have joined us. The theme of this event was how to connect with young people and help them avoid getting in trouble. There were about 2 dozen youth there and we heard their concerns about lack of things to do after school, wanting to work to earn money, the dangers of idle time morphing into getting into trouble, and the traps of drug abuse. We heard the testimony of a young man who had been in and out of juvenile detention since he was 13. He is now 17 and has been off drugs for 14 months. Last night I read a report that more than 50 people have been treated after apparently taking the synthetic marijuana drug K2 in the Austin, Texas area,— which can cause elevated heart rate, seizures, hallucinations and has been linked to deaths. The City of Baytown is providing some programs to address these issues but there is much more to be done. How can we as a church practice hospitality to these young people?

On Wednesday I attended the Rotary Luncheon and heard about CASA, which stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children in Liberty and Chambers County. They need volunteers who will take on one child at a time and be a friend, an advocate for that child. Debbie Duggar needed 11 volunteers that day. I am one that said, "Yes."

Tonight I will be playing at a benefit concert for Victims of Violence at St. Paul Presbyterian in Houston. Musicians from 7 Presbyterian Churches will be playing and the Love offering that will be taken will benefit the Victims of the Orlando Nightclub Shooting and the families of the Police Officers that were killed in Dallas among others.

No one can specifically tell you what your ministry of hospitality should consist of; we should never over-define such a highly personal ministry. But we must -- each of us -- define that ministry for ourselves.

To encourage us about this, let's look at the ministry of Jesus. In a way, we could call his ministry to you and me a ministry of hospitality. Yes, that is what he showed us. The apostle Paul stated it in that singular sentence, "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Think of it, "yet sinners...." God did not withhold hospitality from us until we straightened ourselves out. While we YET were sinners!

Jesus was hospitable toward us by going to the cross and dying for us, in our place. Noticing our sin, he did not refuse to acknowledge us. He did not stop talking to us. He did not withhold information from us about God's love. No, in Christ, God made eye contact with us. The Word became flesh. The face of God has now faced us.

Looking into that face we felt sheltered and healed. Looking at his cross we know we are cleansed and forgiven through our brother Jesus Christ. The cross enables us to follow the divine model of hospitality.

Here is where we find our self-esteem, not in the eyes of our neighbors, but from the knowledge that God loves us. Here is where we find our sense of security, from the knowledge that we were created for a purpose that is eternal.

The person always seeking after the honored seat lacks that sense that they are whole persons. When you encounter someone like this who is so desperate for attention, so desperate to be recognized, don't you wonder about his or her sense of security? Why should it matter if you sit at the head table or not? A secure person carries his or her status with them.

Not everyone in this room has the same spiritual gifts. But we each have our own calling to exercise hospitality. This ministry is more than showing good manners in public. It is a redemptive ministry, like Christ's, whereby we bring a sense of healing and genuine acceptance to other people. As I have said before, I believe we are a welcoming church once people come through our doors. What we need to work on is being a more inviting church so there are more folks to welcome

Christian hospitality ultimately involves speaking God's good word of love to another human soul. What could be more hospitable? How could we provide more of a sheltering spirit or speak a more healing word than to remind someone of the love of God in the cross of Jesus Christ? With this singular message on the lips of our members, we do indeed rise above mere country club status and reveals ourselves as the glorious hospital and hospice of faith.

We may not be invited to a banquet at the United Nations and have to worry about making sure we all get served our rubber chicken simultaneously. ...but we are invited and are called to invite others to a banquet as a member of a kingdom where everyone is on equal footing. Like we sang this morning, "In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north. All Christly souls are one in him throughout the whole wide earth."

Next Sunday we will be coming to this table. We're all sinners in need of salvation. Yet God graciously includes us as guests at this Table. What if we all took it to heart to invite one person to join us next week for communion? What if we took these empty seats in the pews as a challenge to fill? What if we took a business card as an invitation waiting to happen?

Good communion table manners include coming to the table without thinking too much of ourselves. Good communion table manners include coming without looking down on any other guest, for all of us are God's equally beloved guests. Good communion table manners assume that we all know that we come as those who do so because of God's loving and gracious.....hospitality.

Let us pray, Dear Lord we give you thanks for Jesus, the Word made flesh. He taught what it means to obey you completely. Through Him we hear your proclamation of freedom from all that binds us. His Word is alive I the waters of our baptism cleansing us and clothing us in the garment of new life. His Word is alive as host of the heavenly banquet where all may gather and partake of the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

We pray for those who are in need of bread to live. who are in need of hospitals for healing and of hospice for shelter. We pray for peace in our world, and peace in the hearts of our brothers and sisters around the world. We pray for our leaders and the leaders of the nations of the world that striving for position and prominence would defer to striving to love one another as we have been loved. amen.

(1) Emphasis, Mar/Apr 2001, p. 50.