

SERMON: “Making Room in Our Hearts for The Unexpected Guest.” (Luke 14:15-24; Acts 10:17-48)

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross, Sunday, January 29, 2012. St. James Presbyterian Church

So far in our look at how we are called to make room in our hearts for our neighbours – how we are to reveal our love for God by loving our neighbours – we have looked at how Jesus came to be-with us, and how this “be-with” plan was put into practice through His formation of the first small group; we heard how the disciples, having learned what it meant to be changed by community – especially community as experienced within a small group – did what they were taught to do by Jesus and by changing lives and then the world; and we heard how each of us are called – and gifted – to be encouragers of one another as we come to know God – and each other – together. We’ve talked about community – and how living in community is a God-ordained directive; we’ve talked about how it is through community – through our putting our faith into practice within the context of a community that has Christ at its center – lives can be saved through love, because of love – our love for one another. And today we’re going to look at another way in which we can express this love: we’re going to take a few moments to learn about hospitality.

In the Bible, “hospitality” is a very important word. Sociologically, the showing of kindness in welcoming strangers or guests was crucial to survival in the ancient world: the code of hospitality ensured that unexpected guests – strangers – would receive food, water, and a safe place to stay. It is not surprising then, given the cultural context that the Bible was written in, that the Biblical – the theological – understanding of “hospitality” is just as welcoming: in fact one theologian has commented that the Biblical definition of hospitality could be stated as; “Making space for someone you don’t have to make space for;” – or, as we’ve been saying with this series, “making room in our hearts for others.” Of the examples in the Bible it’s clear, just as welcoming a weary and needy stranger into your home provides for them the necessities of life, making room in our hearts for others does too. Hospitality brings life, and when it doesn’t happen – when it isn’t extended, when space/room isn’t made, when someone is ignored, excluded, left out – the result is that that person dies physically and spiritually.

To show us how hospitality changed the world we need to first look at why God had to call us to make space/room for others: and to do this we need to look at the ancient Hebrew concept of separation. Embedded in the first verses of Genesis we told that, in order to form the world, God began by separating things – light and dark, the sky and water, land from sea: we are told that God set things in opposition (night/day) – but also bound them together in ways that brought balance, harmony and delight, especially to God. And what’s important for us to know is that this is the way God wanted creation to be: by separating *and* connecting the elements of creation God provided everything with order and value. That’s why God declared everything in creation good – until the Fall.

One way to think about sin is that sin results in trying to join together something that God has separated or in trying to separate that which God has joined together. In other

words, sin is the disruption of God's order of things. In an attempt to save us from the chaos we unleashed, God sought to begin again with Abraham and the People of Israel by separating them from the other peoples of the world – by making them holy, which means to be “separate from,” “made special.” Now, when you read through the Old Testament, you quickly become aware that there are a lot of rules about “separate-ness” – and in essence that's what the Old Testament really is; a book of laws, it is a manual for Holy Living: it is a set of instructions for how to live a pure and faithful life: *Touch this. Don't touch that. Eat this. Don't eat that. Wear this. Wash that. Don't have cats. etc. (I added the cat one)* The problem is, over time, these laws, that were meant to be prescriptions became prohibitions – more about separation and less about connections.

It was into this world that had taken the old covenant and perverted it into a system of rules and laws that perpetuated the disharmony and imbalance – the division – of the Fall that Jesus came to offer a new covenant that would restore the God's creation. This is why Jesus showed his disciples that God wanted them to live in community with those long thought of as unholy and excluded: women, tax collectors, lepers. This is why Jesus instructed them that it wasn't what went into their mouths that made them unclean, it was what came out of their hearts that did. (Matt 15:10-20) And, it is why Jesus stayed – and ate – with those that were considered unacceptable – such as Gentiles. And this is why – as Jesus spent time teaching His disciples – He showed them that God came to not only be-with them, but to also be-with, to seek out and show hospitality to everyone by saying “*there's room in God's kingdom/in my heart for you!*”

The lesson that Peter and the other disciples who watched Jesus doing this was that – if Jesus, who was the Holiest man they had ever met, who knew God like nobody else, who embodied a love and purity they had never seen, spent time with sinners and welcomed outcasts into His community – they too were to open their hearts to others, to those that God longed for them to love. The Acts reading documents how Peter is moved by the Spirit to live up to this commission to make room in his heart for others. After God tells Peter three times in a vision that “*what God has made clean, you must not call profane*” – a reference to the religious food laws – Peter is met by a messengers from a Gentile/Roman centurion who wanted Peter to come visit him. With the vision still on his mind, Peter senses that the Spirit is prompting him to make room for whatever it is God wants him to do; so he does what Jesus would do, he invites them – the messengers of a man who he shouldn't even speak to – in: he welcomes them into his home.

But that's not all, after they tell Peter about Cornelius and his desire to know God, and that God had spoken to him, Peter goes to Caesarea; and upon arriving at Cornelius' door, he crosses another threshold into Cornelius' house. Peter tells Cornelius about what God had shown him regarding what – and who – will be acceptable in His kingdom, and how this means that God desires connection – not separation, community not division. Clearly, says Peter, God intends His saving love to be for everyone: that His kingdom is open to all – that God “*shows no partiality*” – that it has room for everyone. Then Peter does what Peter is famous for – he tells all those listening to him

the Gospel of God's saving love known through Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection – and that this loving God “*is Lord of all.*” And, as we heard, Peter's sermon results in what is called the ‘Gentile Pentecost’ in which the Holy Spirit falls upon all who heard him, changing their lives forever.

The Luke reading – the parable of the banquet – is a glimpse of how much room God has in His heart for those who need Him most. In the parable Jesus is telling His disciples what they will come to know and practice – that in the Kingdom people make space for those they do not have to make space for. The Good News is that God did that for each of us through Jesus who made room in His heart by giving up all that He enjoyed in heaven to become one of us, to be-with us, and to die for us. God welcomes all who come to Him and He compels us to welcome/accept them too. As we contemplate how we are to show our love for God by loving our neighbours, ask yourself the question that God's asking; “Will you make room in your heart for the people I send into your life?” Will you?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to make room in our hearts for our neighbours – to love God by loving others. Amen.