

Hurts So Good: *Generous Hospitality*
Luke 14:7-24

We're taking a few weeks to dig into the subject of radical generosity. Remember that the biblical notion of generosity is a transformation of the heart due to God's radical generosity towards us. When we receive the gift of God's radical generosity by receiving the grace of Jesus who died in our place...when we receive God's radical generosity by receiving our new righteousness as those who are found completely acceptable and welcomed into the presence of the Father, God's radical generosity should lead us to become radically generous people in every aspect of our lives.

I mentioned to you last week that there are many different currencies in our lives when it comes to being generous. A currency is a medium for exchanging value, so one of those currencies...and the most obvious currency, is money or wealth. When we think of generosity, we usually think about devoting some portion of our wealth towards charity or the church or those in need. Wealth is only one currency amongst many, and quite frankly, the currency of money and wealth is often the easiest means of making ourselves appear to be generous when, in fact, we are not generous in our hearts.

Last week we looked at the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18 where Jesus critiques the Pharisee who was technically generous with his income because he tithed on everything that he got, and yet clearly this man was not generous in his heart. He was arrogant and self-righteous, and he looked upon other people with contempt. So, we'll have to look further into our hearts and the various currencies of our lives to discover if we are truly generous or not.

For example: what is easier for you to do—to write a check or to give up your precious time? If you find it harder to give time than money, your most precious currency is time...and that's how you will know if you are radically generous. The transforming power of the Gospel will lead us to give of that which is most precious to us...and that will be costly...it will cut deep...it will hurt. This is the main truth of this series that I shared with you last Sunday: The Gospel leads us to radical generosity that is costly. If your generosity is not costly...if it doesn't cut deep...if it doesn't hurt, then you are not yet radically generous in the currency that is most precious to you.

This morning I'm going to focus on a currency that is quite costly and maybe even a bit intimidating for some of us, and that is the currency of hospitality. Many of us give of our time to serve and volunteer, and many of us give some money to charity or noble causes, but we would rather not get too involved with people! We like our privacy; we don't want to get tangled up in other people's problems; and we generally prioritize spending time and investing energy in people we like and have much in common with as opposed to getting entangled with "strange" people or poor people or people we don't think we can relate with. Be that as it may, Jesus calls His Church to be generous with our hospitality as a result of God's grace. I'm going to be working from a lengthy passage from Luke 14:7-24 that falls into three segments that I'll cover under three subheadings:

1) Resisting the Inner Ring; 2) A Strange Invitation; and 3) The Poor in Spirit Banquet.

I. Resisting the Inner Ring

Our entire text takes place at the home of a particular Pharisee, one of high repute, who was known to be “a ruler of the Pharisees” as we read in Luke 14:1. As Jesus looks around the room, he notices how the Pharisees are all scurrying to sit as close to the influential host as possible, seats which were considered the places of honor in the ancient culture. So, Jesus provides a little parable, warning the Pharisees about the seductive power of “the inner ring.”

But first: What is the “inner ring”? You know all about the inner ring if you ever attended middle school! It’s that group of “popular” kids that you always wished you could have been a part of. Or...maybe you were part of that inner ring, and you remember how horribly you treated those kids who weren’t pretty enough or talented enough or cool enough to be allowed into your circle. The inner ring consists of insiders who find their joy in knowing they are the few who know, and the rest are outsiders.

Inner rings are everywhere we live, everywhere we work, and everywhere we attend school. Inner rings are inevitable, and not all inner rings are as evil as the one in middle school. A group of friends who enjoy working together or playing music together may have all the appearance of an inner ring, and their exclusivity may be accidental based upon the need for high level skills or simply the size of the room in which they gather. Jesus, James, John, and Peter may have been thought of as an “inner ring” of sorts by the other apostles. Depending on the context, an inner ring may or may not be evil; however, it’s the *desperate desire* to be part of the inner ring that does such great damage to the human soul.

C. S. Lewis, in a lecture given at Kings College in 1944, states, “Of all the passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.”

We all know this is true. When we enter into a new middle school, or we enter into college as a freshman and we rush a fraternity or sorority, or when we begin our new job at the bottom of the totem pole, we all experience the horrible awareness that we are on the outside looking in. Most of us are so uncomfortable with being an outsider and so eager for acceptance that we are willing to do just about anything to “get in”. And it is this desire to be “in the know,” to get into that circle that will advance our careers or enhance our reputation that motivates us to embellish the truth, compromise our character, betray our friends, or even break the law.

I read an article this week about a man who was being considered as the next president of a large, protestant denomination here in the United States. His résumé stated that he had received multiple degrees from several prestigious universities, but when the committee did some fact checking, they discovered that this individual had lied about those degrees. Now...think about that for a moment. This man was thought to be not only a Christian, not only a Christian leader, but a leader with such giftedness and integrity as to serve as the top leader of leaders in one of the largest denominations in the world...and he blatantly lied about his academic achievements!

What would cause a Christian leader to lie in such a bold and unapologetic way? Is it not the very desire that Lewis is speaking about?

Ironically, our desperation to be liked, respected, included, honored, and admired will inevitably lead us to be very unliked, disrespected, and dishonored! Lewis writes: The desire to be inside the invisible line illustrates this rule. As long as you are governed by that desire you will never get what you want. You are trying to peel an onion: if you succeed there will be nothing left. Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain.

Think about it. Think about those people who are constantly striving to impress you with their accomplishments. Do they impress you or irritate you? Think about those people who are so driven to climb the ladder that they are willing to step on people to get to the top...are those the people you look to hire into your organization? Jesus sums up this simple truth, saying “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

To illustrate His point, Jesus points to one of the biggest occasions in the ancient world, the wedding banquet. He states, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come to you and say to you, ‘Give up your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The places of honor in the ancient wedding feast were reserved for those who had the closest ties of friendship to the host. Now, we can all imagine the embarrassment of arrogantly seating yourself in the place of honor, only to be asked by the host to move down the table in front of all the guests in order to make way for one who was truly honorable.

Question: who decides on those who will occupy the places of honor? The Host. So what is Jesus saying? The humble are those who will eventually be honored Host; but the arrogant are those who will eventually be humiliated.

By the way, we should absolutely compare this parable to the parable we looked at last week about the Pharisee and the tax collector because Jesus finishes each parable with the exact same words about those who exalt themselves as opposed to those who humble themselves. In the Luke 18 parable, the Pharisee exalted himself in his prayer...assuming that because of his self-promotion and his accomplishments, the great Host, who is God, would have no choice but to welcome the Pharisee to the place of honor at His table. But Jesus says, no...you don't get to sit in the place of honor. The place of honor has been reserved for the humble...for the man who has no résumé at all...for the man who has surrendered himself to the mercy of God. This man, who was poor in spirit, is elevated to the place of honor, although that is a place he would never think to claim for himself.

Church, as Jesus-followers, it should be our nature and our sincere desire to humbly take the lowest place wherever we go. Why? Because we see ourselves accurately. We know we are sinners who deserve Hell on our best day. We are not those who exalt ourselves because the

cross makes us humble, right? Now, being humble does not mean that we are forever self-loathing. Jesus has made us perfectly acceptable to the Father. Because of God's great love for us, we have been included, adopted, and grafted into the Body of Christ. We have a new identity, and we have been welcomed into the fellowship of the Trinity. Our unmerited acceptance should produce humility within our hearts but also confidence as to our place in this world. When we truly know ourselves as sinners saved by grace, we can have confidence that we are accepted by the Father, even when we experience exclusion or rejection by the "inner ring."

Church, do not let the fear of being an outsider lead you to compromise your character. Instead, trust God, work hard, maintain your integrity, be willing to do what is right even if you have to go it alone, and over time, your humility and hard work will lead to honor and exaltation, if not in this life, most certainly in the life to come. As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Now, as those who are wholly accepted by God, we are also those who are to create environments for others to experience the profound love and acceptance of Christ, amen? That leads us to our next subheading...

II. A Strange Invitation

In vss. 12-14, Jesus turns from talking to the guests to now addressing the host. He states:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. 13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Now, at first blush, this teaching of Jesus seems unrealistic and offensive. Why in the world is Jesus telling us to NOT invite our friends, fellow believers, family and wealthy neighbors to our house for dinner? There is something missing here that we don't get because we are not first century middle eastern residents.

In the stratified culture of the ancient world, the only way to move up the social ladder was to be invited by somebody who was above you. So, banquets were the primary means of social networking and advancement. If you were eager to move up the social ladder, you would invite people who were wealthier, more powerful, and more influential to come to your banquet in the hope and expectation that they would later invite you to their banquets and social gatherings. The closer you were invited to sit next to the powerful host, the more likely he might give you a job with his organization or put in a good word for you to the magistrate. Such is why people were constantly hosting banquets in the ancient world, and everyone knew what it meant to be seated in places of honor. By the way, this means of social networking is what we call the "patronage system" and it's still very much the primary mode of operating in a little town called Washington D.C.!

So what is Jesus saying? He's saying, "Stop leveraging your invitation and hospitality for selfish gain and self-promotion. Throw out the patronage system, and instead, leverage your invitation and hospitality to bless people who cannot benefit you in any way." The ancient Greek word for hospitality was *xenia*, which literally meant "guest friendship." But when the Apostle Paul speaks of hospitality in Romans 12:13, he uses a different word. He writes, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show *philoxenia*." The literal translation of that word is closer to "love of strangers." Dr. Tim Keller highlights three facets to this idea of biblical hospitality.

First, biblical hospitality is welcoming people into your living space and refreshing them with the same resources you use to refresh yourself. For most of us, that means inviting people into our homes and refreshing them with a good meal and some time by the pool or by the firepit or whatever resources you draw upon to refresh yourselves. In my case, it means inviting you onto my boat for a late afternoon trip to the lake for some fishing ministry!

Second, biblical hospitality means that we extend this invitation to strangers. In fact, biblical hospitality means treating strangers as family. Now, those strangers typically fall into three different categories: 1) Other Christians who are not like you...so this might be inviting a fellow believer from a different race, nationality, socio-economic background, or even a missionary on furlough to come to your home as a place of refuge, nourishment, and friendship. 2) Your neighbors often qualify as strangers as well...some of them are stranger than others! Inviting your neighbors to break bread, to show a sincere interest in their lives, to help carry their burdens...this is how we love people toward belief...particularly those people who live close enough to us that we can develop genuine, lasting relationships. 3) The poor are also those we are to invite into our living spaces and treat as family. Clearly Jesus wants us to invite those who cannot pay us back, those who have great needs and probably introduce a level of complexity into our lives. This might include people who are homeless, people who are barely getting by, people who are lonely, and any number of people that God arranges for you to meet by His divine appointment. You will know that you are actually being generous when your act of hospitality is quite costly.

Several years ago, I was about to head home from work when I heard a soft knock on my office door. I opened the door and met a woman who was about my age who asked if I could pray for her. I invited her to sit down as she shared how hard her life had been lately, and she asked me if I could help her out by filling her gas tank. I agreed to help after we prayed, but as I approached her car, I realized that this woman, along with her daughter, her special needs son, and her mother were all living out of her car. It was 98 degrees outside, and they had no air conditioning.

I immediately said to her, "You and your family will be staying at my house tonight." She looked at me as if I was crazy, but I insisted. There was simply no way that they were going to spend the night packed into her car when I had space in my air-conditioned home to get them out of the heat. I called Christy as they followed me back to our home in Olathe, and you can imagine how that conversation went! However, Christy and I have a code that we rarely use, but when we use it, the conversation is over. The code is simple and direct: "This is a God thing."

By the time I got home, Christy had dinner waiting, the kids were scrambling to get beds made up, and we invited these total strangers to come and live with us as family for the next few weeks. Now, before you begin thinking that I am a wonderful person, please know that I did a lot of things wrong during those two weeks. As a preacher, I was already drafting the sermon in my head and thinking of how this family would stand on the stage and tell the story of how the West's brought them in...I'm not lying...I was an idiot. I even suggested that maybe they could come and share their testimonies after the first two days at our home. Thankfully, the Lord profoundly rebuked my spirit and I soon realized that I was to not get one ounce of credit; I was not to manipulate them to serve my agenda; I was not to expect anything of them at all; and it wasn't until many years later that God allowed me to even share this story with anyone. I also learned that I was to invest a few thousand dollars into car repairs, a deposit on an apartment, helping move their stuff out of storage, food, clothing, you name it. It did not take long to realize that I was NOT a generous person, but God was teaching me what true, biblical generosity and hospitality look like. And I can tell you: it's costly. It's messy. And I can't even tell you where that family is today. We lost touch several years ago now, and I often wonder what has become of them. Truth be told, that's none of my business. My job was to welcome strangers into my home and treat them like family...that's what we tried to do.

My story pales in comparison to many families in our church who have opened their hearts and homes to children in the foster care system. Fostering and adopting children is one of the purest, most costly expressions of Christian hospitality that there is. Some of you host foreign exchange students; some of you host summer staffers; some of you host the new people you just met after the service for lunch! There are many ways of demonstrating hospitality to strangers, but that behavior is not considered optional for those who have been redeemed.

OK, the third facet of Christian hospitality mentioned by Tim Keller is the notion that we open our homes to strangers trusting that God will make some of them into friends. Hebrews 13:1-2 reads, "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

That verse is pointing back to the story of Abraham in Genesis 18 when the Lord takes on physical form and appears at Abraham's doorstep with two angels by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham demonstrates remarkable generosity, and it turns out he was hosting the Lord Himself. The notion here is that when we are obedient, when we practice costly generosity with our hospitality towards strangers, God becomes the true host, and God arranges relationships such that some of these "strangers" become our dearest friends.

So, just a few suggestions for how we might practice radically generous hospitality. First, start with the most obvious opportunities. Invite your neighbors and co-workers to CHURCH! That's right...this is one of your living spaces where you find refreshment, so inviting people in your sphere of influence to church can be a form of hospitality, particularly if you take them to lunch or invite them over for lunch after the service. Second, invite each other to connect over coffee, lunch, or perhaps an evening at the house for dinner. Nothing builds community like breaking

bread together. Third, consider hosting a small group in your home. Maybe that small group is for fellow believers, or maybe you would be considering hosting a group for your neighbors from all different backgrounds. You can volunteer to serve as an usher or a greeter, giving special attention to our visitors and those who walk in knowing no one. At the minimum, you could leverage a few minutes before and after the service on Sunday to seek out someone you have never met and extend a warm and genuine greeting. Radical generosity may some day look like housing a homeless family for a few weeks, but for most of us, simply greeting and getting to know someone you have never met would be a great place to start.

Now remember, radically generous Christian hospitality is only possible in the deepest, most costly way when we see how God brought us to His table through the costly sacrifice of His Son. And that picture is wrapped up in the last teaching of Jesus in our passage.

III. The Poor in Spirit Banquet

As the dinner is wrapping up, one of the proud Pharisees proclaims:
“Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

I suspect there was something about the way the Pharisee spoke those words that really irritated Jesus. Clearly the proud Pharisee presumptuously assumed that he and his buddies were all going to eat bread in the kingdom of God due to their illustrious résumés and Jewish heritage, so Jesus decides to tell a little story to pop their proud bubble...I know it popped mine. Here's the story that Jesus tells in vss. 16-24:

16 But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. 17 And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ 18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ 19 And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’ 20 And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ 21 So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ 22 And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ 23 And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. 24 For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’”

I don't have a lot of time to dig deep into this story, but Jesus is clearly making a point that extends beyond earthly banquets and rude guests, right? Jesus is pointing to the Great Banquet--the Kingdom of God banquet.

The point here is clear: there are those who have been invited...those the Great Host would expect to respond with enthusiasm...those who may have expected to be invited...but these are the very people who make up excuses for not coming. Their excuses reveal a people who have plenty...they are people with resources of their own...they are people who are distracted by their great possessions, wealth, and social affairs. They obviously feel as though their excuses are legitimate...that the Great Host will be understanding if they decline His invitation. But Jesus reveals how the Host actually feels about those excuses...the Host becomes angry. Why? Why would the host become angry about these guests making excuses for not coming to the feast? Church, you know why. The Host is angry because the Great Banquet was costly to the Host...costly at a level that the guests could not possibly imagine.

The opportunity to sit at the Feast came at the expense of the Beautiful One, the Only Beloved Son of the Master. So no...the excuses are not overlooked. In fact, those who were originally invited are now struck from the guest list, and in their place are the poor, the blind, the lame, and others who are compelled to come in by the servants of the Host. These are the “poor in spirit” that Jesus referred to in the Sermon on the Mount. And notice: the lowly ones are brought in...not invited. Why? Because poor people could never reciprocate...they could never repay the host. In the ancient culture the poor would have declined the invitation...thinking themselves unworthy to ever attend such a feast. The Master says, “Bring in the lowly...all of them.”

Do you know why the original guests were struck from the list? They were “middle class in spirit.” The “middle class in spirit” are those who are generally comfortable and feel no sense of obligation to attend the Master’s feast if the feast does not fit well into their busy schedules. The “middle class in spirit” don’t feel the sense of awe and surprising delight to be included in the Feast...they feel a sense of bored entitlement—so they can take it or leave it.

Church, let us not be presumptuous, “middle-class in spirit” religious people who respond to the extravagant, sacrificial generosity of our Master with bored entitlement and lame excuses. Let us not confuse our home on earth as somehow our true home. Our true home awaits us...this world will never be our home, and these earthly treasures are not the treasures that last. Let us remain poor and humble in spirit, amazed and humbled that the Master would make His Son homeless so that we might have a home in heaven. Jesus became poor that we would become rich. Jesus became a stranger that we might be welcomed in as family.

I pray that the truth and power of God’s extravagant love for sinners will lead us to have extravagant love for the poor in spirit all around us. Let us welcome in strangers and treat them like family, extending to them the refreshment of the Gospel through tangible expressions of grace. Church...be radically generous as the Father has been radically generous to you. Let us pray.