

Being a Hospitable Guest preached by Michael Cheuk 10.21.18

(Luke 10:1-11 NIV) **Luke 10:1** After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ² He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³ Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴ Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. ⁵ "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' ⁶ If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. ⁸ "When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. ⁹ Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' ¹⁰ But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ¹¹ 'Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.'

Once upon a time, there lived a nine-year-old girl named Holly. In her short life, the most magical, warm, and happy times she could remember were the special nights she spent on Christmas Eve. For her, what was special wasn't the opening of presents, although that was pretty exciting. No, the most wonderful part of her Christmas Eves was the family dinners. Imagine her house all cleaned and decorated with wreaths, garlands, lights and the crèche. In the middle of the living room stood the Christmas tree, adorned with glistening ornaments lit by strings of white lights. Hear the joyful sounds of aunts and uncles, siblings and cousins, gathered around laughing and telling stories. Inhale the warm aroma of the turkey roasting and the pies baking. As amazing as all that was, the pinnacle of the evening was when Judy, Holly's mother, brought in the carved turkey, and after a prayer, told everyone to dig in. Judy was an amazing cook and her signature dishes were her homemade stuffing and her pecan pie. Holly remembers seeing her mother beam with pride and satisfaction as she watched family members help themselves to second and third helpings of her stuffing, and as they "oohed" and "aahed" while wrestling to see who would get the first serving of her pecan pies. In the early years of her life, Holly never felt as much at home as when the family gathered for Christmas Eve dinner.

If you were to ask Holly what hospitality looked like, she would say that it would look like Christmas Eve dinners during her early childhood. And she would be right. There is something beautiful about opening the doors of one's home and providing a nurturing space of welcome that meets our deep need for human connection, safety, and physical sustenance. Our society is suffering from an epidemic of loneliness, and we desperately want to belong to a place where we are seen, where we are known by name, and where we are accepted for who we are. God knows that this world needs more gracious hosts. This morning, however, I'd like to explore what it means for us to be hospitable guests. But first, let's continue with my story.

Twenty years have passed. Holly is now twenty-nine, married, with two children of her own. And the annual Christmas dinner that she loved so much as a child? Well ... that's a bit more complicated now! Holly's mom Judy is as hospitable as ever, but Judy wants to offer hospitality only at *her* house, because Christmas Eve is just not the same anywhere else. Holly feels guilty when her family decides to spend Christmas Eve with her husband's family instead of with her mother. And when they do go to her mother's house for Christmas Eve dinner, Holly is uncomfortable when her mom insists that her children eat her pecan pie, even though they don't like pecans. "This is grandma's famous pecan pie, and everyone loves it" her mother sometimes says to her young children. "Surely you can eat a slice...just for grandma?"

Fifteen more years have passed. Holly is now forty-four, and her children are in high school. This year, Holly and her husband decide to host Christmas Eve dinner themselves. After many conversations, Holly's mom was finally convinced to come to Holly's home for dinner. Holly told her mom: "Don't worry about cooking! Just come and bring your appetite! Be our guest!" Holly's family cleaned and decorated the house, and everyone in the family pitched in to help with the big dinner. They made stuffing and even baked chocolate and apple pies, which were the children's favorites. When Judy arrived for dinner, she brought with her ... you guessed it, her stuffing and *two* of her pecan pies! During dinner, Judy kept offering *her* stuffing to everyone. When it was dessert time, Judy hurried to the kitchen and brought only *her* pecan pies, and sliced them up to distribute around the table. Judy's hospitality knows no end!

Now, I'm sure *no one* here can relate to this fictional story, but I think it speaks to the complicated nature of hospitality. When we think of hospitality, we often think about hosting and welcoming others into *our* space, to eat food we serve, to fit into our schedule, and... to kick them out when the evening is over. Yes, we are called to be hospitable, but there are times when we are also called to *receive* hospitality from others, times when we are called to be a hospitable guest.

In our Gospel lesson from Luke chapter 10, we see an example of Jesus sending his disciples out to be hospitable guests. Jesus sent his disciples out as advance scouts on a mission to the Gentile towns where He wanted to minister. I imagine this to be a challenging mission for the disciples. After all, they saw Gentiles to be inferior infidels, unbelievers who ate unclean foods. It's not right for Jews to associate with Gentiles in public, much less go into their homes. Gentiles had religious cooties, so to speak. And if the disciples *had* to go, they wanted to see themselves as being sent to bring God to the godless, to proclaim repentance among the sinful, to speak truth to the ignorant, to offer provisions to the poor, and to display God's power among the weak.

Instead, Jesus sent them out stripped of all the trappings of power, privilege, and superiority by instructing: "Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road." In other words, go into these towns vulnerable and dependent upon the mercy of Gentiles. Go with no financial safety net, with no stockpile of food. Go barefoot as a sign of poverty and your own sinfulness. And don't go greeting people you know who will invite you in. Instead, knock on strangers' doors. And if a door is opened, proclaim peace and wholeness to that household and look for a person of peace who is willing to extend hospitality and welcome you in. If you *are* invited, stay there for a while, eating and drinking whatever they give you.

In college, I was a Baptist Student Union summer missionary to Australia. I know what it's like to eat unfamiliar foods. For instance, I recall learning to like – sloooooowly learning to like -- sandwiches spread with Vegemite, a black pungent paste made from leftover brewers' yeast extract. Mmm...my first bite almost sent me gagging. But I did learn to like it – just in time to go home again. However, my experience with vegemite is nothing compared to those of two fellow BSU missionaries sent to New Zealand that summer. They were sent to work for a church in a small, rural village. One day, the pastor of that church invited them over for a meal at the parsonage. He didn't have much money, and the best he could do was serve them ... kangaroo tail soup ... with pieces of curled tail floating in a clear broth. Those missionaries ate what was offered to them. As guests, they received the holy hospitality from this pastor who was poor in material goods, but rich in faith in a God who's faithful in giving daily bread.

This is a story that I will never forget, but I'm still struggling to learn its lesson. In my current work with the Charlottesville Clergy Collective, black and white faith leaders have talked about how to work together to address racial challenges in Charlottesville. In one of our conversations, the black pastors said to the white pastors: "We know where all your churches are located, and we've been in many of your services. But do you know where we are? We've invited you to our services and events, and you and your congregations have never shown up. And when you do show up, you come trying to 'fix our problems' but you never stay long enough to learn that 'our problems' are partially the result of your policies. In your eyes, we're projects that need repairing and not people who want relationships."

Those pastors' comments cut me to the quick...because it applied to me. In the pastorates that I've served, I've invited black pastors and their congregations to join us at our Easter services or Vacation Bible Schools, and my congregations and I have congratulated ourselves on our hospitality. But when it came to reciprocating that hospitality, I've often found excuses for not accepting their invitations. "What if we have visitors on the Sunday while we're at the black church? Will we lose that Sunday's offering collection? We're a bit uncomfortable with their worship style, and it goes way too long."

I suspect it was uncomfortable for Jesus' disciples to be sent out of their comfort zones and into the unfamiliar spaces of the marginalized. But Jesus was not asking them to do anything that He had not already done. Jesus himself was sent to earth as a naked, vulnerable baby born in a manger to an unwed peasant couple, in an insignificant village among a marginalized people in an occupied land, at the edge

of the Roman Empire, on a planet orbiting a small sun on the fringes of a galaxy that's one among two trillion. Jesus lived among the marginalized for thirty-three years, and he ate and drank what was offered him. And while some welcomed him, ultimately, he was rejected and killed by those with privilege and power. Jesus emptied himself in his incarnation, as Paul reminded us by citing that beautiful ancient hymn: "[Jesus,] Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-- even death on a cross!" You see, Jesus was the ultimate hospitable guest. And his life was also the embodiment of the reversals that characterize the Kingdom of God: the last will be first, the outsiders are the insiders, the least is the greatest, the greatest shall be the servant. And may I add one more? The host shall be the guest.

Mark Charles, a Navajo Christian and former pastor, advocates this reversal in our identity and in our ethical imagination as a way white Christians can begin seeking justice for native peoples in America. Mark gave a lecture a couple of weeks ago in Charlottesville after Columbus or Indigenous People Day, and I'd like to end my sermon with his provocative insights.

Mark Charles argues that the native peoples who have lived and flourished in America for over 18,000 years – *these native peoples* are the hosts of this land. European settlers and colonists who came in the 1600s were the original undocumented immigrants who never asked for nor were granted permission to live here. From Charles' perspective, all the descendants of the waves of immigrants who came here since are *guests* in this land.

Charles then tells this story: "Native communities are like an old grandmother who has a large and beautiful house. Years ago someone came into our house, and they locked us upstairs in the bedroom. Today our house is full of people. They are sitting on our furniture, they are eating our food, they are having a party in our house. Now, they've since come upstairs and unlocked the door to our bedroom, but it's much later and we're tired, we're old, we're weak and we're sick. So we don't come down. But the thing that causes us the most pain is this. Nobody from the party ever comes upstairs and seeks out the grandmother in the bedroom, sits down next to her in the bed, takes her hand, and simply says 'thank you'. Thank you for letting us be in your house."¹

Now, I don't think doing this will magically bring about justice for native peoples. But if we're able to take even this step toward being a hospitable guest with our native American hosts, with our black brothers and sisters, with our neighbors here in Lynchburg and with each other here Peakland Baptist, you can be sure of this: "The kingdom of God has come near."

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Mark Charles, "The Heresy of Christendom and the Trauma of the Doctrine of Discovery," 2:16:40 minute mark. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=8200&v=jenCjU11Odc.