

The Gracious Host 10.7.18

Psalm 24

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;
² for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

³ Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?

Who may stand in his holy place?

⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god. ^[a]

⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior.

⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, God of
Jacob. ^{[b][c]}

⁷ Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

⁸ Who is this King of glory?

The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

⁹ Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory?

The Lord Almighty -he is the King of glory.

Luke 14:15-24

The Parable of the Great Banquet

¹⁵ When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is
the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

¹⁶ Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many
guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had
been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

¹⁸ "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a
field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

¹⁹ "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try
them out. Please excuse me.'

²⁰ "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

²¹ "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the
house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and
alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

²² “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

²³ “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

How To Be a Gracious Host:

1) Prepare early

Some articles I read in researching this topic talk about cleaning thoroughly, some about checking in with your guests to see what food allergies they might have, or what kind of snacks they prefer. One says that she always keeps “chilled champagne and Sangria in my fridge” along with “some dip or cookie dough” so that she can offer up a lovely drink or a quick snack at a moment’s notice.

2) Pay attention to thoughtful details

Make sure your bathroom is not only clean, but has every conceivable need provided for in easy reach. Have extra clean towels available, and maybe some travel-sized toiletries. Keep the pathways in your house clear, so that people can safely maneuver, and have some “creature comforts” around, such as carafes of water or candles, so that people can make themselves feel at home.

3) Make people feel safe

Give guests all your information before they arrive—your address, your phone numbers, maybe even your wifi code or your personal email—so that they do not worry that they won’t be able to contact you in case of emergency. Some articles say to give your house guests a key, so they can get in and out on their own. Beyond covering their needs, make sure their sense of security is taken care of—the gracious host makes guests feel comfortable, by letting them lead the conversation, and making sure they don’t worry if they ever spill a drink or accidentally break something. A gracious host never wants guests to feel uncomfortable.

4) Be generous with your food, your time and your presence

Mingle with guests equally. Do a personal inventory before guests arrive—why did you invite them? Make sure you know how you are feeling, so that feelings of fatigue or discomfort aren’t communicated to guests. Remember, it is your job as host to make guests feel welcomed—they are already out of their comfort zone. It is you who brings them in and makes them feel comfortable in your space. The

generosity of your spirit, in conversation as well as in offerings of food and drink, will help guests relax and make the whole time together more open and pleasant.

5) Let go of expectations and the need to control the time

Once the event has started, let it go where it will. Be open to the moment and to the gifts your guests have to offer. You invited them because you want them here—let their influence affect the flow of the event.

The Gracious Host is, therefore, generous, confident, prepared, open, protective and inclusive. And, as stunning as it may sound, the same guidelines offered by “Modern Eitquette,” “The Gracious Living Guide,” “The Image Manager,” and “The Art of Manliness” are pretty much the same guidelines laid out in scripture as the definition of biblical hospitality.

My doctoral work, which I completed in 2017, was centered on the theology of biblical hospitality. That is, the pervasive theme, throughout scripture, of the need to welcome, and the way to welcome the outsider, or stranger, into our midst. The Hebrew word, which is most often translated “stranger” or “alien,” is *ger*; it has the sense of someone who is not of our tribe—someone who was not born here, but lives here now. The Greeks, being more urban in their language and having many words for one idea, used several words: *xenos* (which means “foreigner” or “outsider”); *parsikos* (a “stranger” or “foreigner who lives in a place without the right of citizenship”); or *parapidemos* (“one who comes from a foreign country”) (Kearse, *Making Room*, 2017, p. 52). In his book on biblical hospitality, S. C. Barton says that for Jesus and the Apostle Paul,

hospitality...is not just a practical issue. It is a fundamental expression of the gospel: a response to God’s hospitality to humankind in providing Christ as the “paschal lamb” (I Cor 5:7) and an outworking of what it means to be members of the one “body of Christ,” sharing Christ’s eschatological table by eating bread, which is his Body, and drinking wine, which is his blood (I Cor 11:17-34).

S. C. Barton, “Hospitality: Jewish Background,” *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 502.

The theology behind the hospitality theme is that God is, and always has been, the owner of all that there is. We have the Psalm, our reading for today, which

says, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and all who dwell therein." We have Leviticus 25:23, which says, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants." There is the reminder, throughout the Old Testament and into the New, that we are not to oppress foreigners in our land in any way, shape or form, because we come from a people who were oppressed. We have been the foreigners; we have been the outcasts. Our people know what it's like to live in a foreign land. This is as true of Americans as it was of Israelites: some of our families came here to escape oppression; some as refugees from war; some came as servants and even slaves; some as hopeful pilgrims, and some as exiles or convicts. And because God has freed us from our oppression, and because the land has never been ours to begin with, we are not to use our position, as the insiders we have become, to oppress anyone else. We are to offer gracious hospitality: prepared for our guests, making them feel safe and comfortable, offering them the best food and drink, giving up our own agenda in favor of theirs.

Bread is an excellent symbol for hospitality. Good bread is an amazing thing: it is, at its best, almost synonymous with love. It is made with simple ingredients and created, again, at its best, by hand. Today is World Communion Sunday. On this day, around the world, communities of faith of all Christian denominations are celebrating this table fellowship together with unleavened bread, with flat bread, with brown bread, with homemade yeast bread, such as ours. Together, we are remembering that, as Jesus broke this bread, he said to his disciples, "Whenever you eat this bread." He did not say, "Whenever you perform this ritual in a sanctuary." He said, "Every time you pick up bread, remember me." He said, "Whenever you sit down with friends, and you share bread together, remember that the bread belongs to God, that you belong to God."

Quite often, when we have heard the parables of Jesus, we have been encouraged to think of them as allegories: for example, we have been told that in the parable that was read for you today, the "certain man" is God; the people he invited are the people of Israel, and so on. This reading is very limiting. It implies that the parable can only be read in one way. I find, instead, that it helps to think of each parable as starting with the phrase, "What if?" What if a person gave a party, bought all the supplies, spent a lot of time and money getting ready for it,

and then, at the last minute, all the people he invited came up with some excuse not to come? And what if that person then sends his caterer out into the streets to get guests—inviting in whoever they happen upon, whether those people are high class or middle class or even clean? And what if, after all the guests from the streets are in the room, there is still room for more? Picture it—more than a simple allegory, that reflects the essence of the hospitality of God. The hospitality of God is always about more—there is more room, there is more food, there is more wine, there is more love...always.

Personally, I have found that I have a very finite amount of love. We each discover, along the way, that the sense of freedom and generosity we were born with erodes, over the years, as we observe, and are subject to, the behaviors of our fellow human beings. Based on our individual behavior, most of us are, at some moment every day, pretty unlovable. We are petty, and selfish—we think of ourselves more than we think of anyone else. We are fearful and insecure and needy and petulant. Over the years of my adult life, I have found it difficult to love broadly. Early in my career as a teacher, I realized that I could not love my students. They were obnoxious, disobedient, uncooperative, undisciplined, disrespectful and chaotic—to a person. At times, as a minister, I have found it difficult to love my colleagues, my parishioners, and, at times, the rest of humanity. The author Graham Greene said, “One cannot love humanity. One can only love people.” I couldn’t even do that. Every time I ran up against that bad moment in their day, that thing inside of them which they could not overcome, my own selfishness and weakness came forward, and any generosity I might have felt for them dissipated like morning mist.

But what I discovered, repeatedly, was that God could love them. That God could provide for me a way to love them. One of the things that helps me to know, to the very core of my being, that God is at work in the world is that I was able to love my students; I fell in love with the people with whom and for whom I ministered; I am in love with you. And there is no credit for me in this—you may not know me that well, but I know myself well enough to know that, left alone, I would like nothing more than to have favorites, nothing more than to get into fights and have factions and send searing, scathing messages out into the world from my pen. But this bread works on me. It affects me. It changes me. I am both

the person dragged in off the street to receive the strange and wonderful hospitality of a wealthy weirdo, and I am that wealthy weirdo, blissfully pulling strangers into my house, saying, “Come in! Sit! Eat! There’s more than enough to go around!”

We are going to talk, over the next several weeks, about the hospitality of God, and what that hospitality looks like when we embrace it as our own. Today, we begin with bread and with the cup. Today, I have been a bit controlling with the bread. I want you to take more. Take the whole cupcake foil. Take more than you need. Take it so that your biggest problem is how you’re going to eat all that bread. And think of this: the earth is the Lord’s and what has God chosen to do with this vast creation? God has given it over to us for our use. Not our ownership, but our use. And has given us permission to use it however we choose. God’s generosity is vast—beyond our imagining. It is loose, and flexible and free. As we come to this table, let us take into ourselves the generosity of God—allowing ourselves to become loose—allowing that love to flow through our veins until we feel it spilling over—until we cannot help but pull people in off the streets to share it with them, with no criterion whatsoever except that they are children of God. Come—you are invited to this table—it does not belong to anyone in this room—it never has. But we have been recipients of the generosity of God—we have, ourselves, been brought in from the streets to this table. And we know that the one rule of the table is that everyone is welcome. Come in. Sit. Eat. There is more than enough to go around.