

A MINISTRY OF HOSPITALITY Luke 14:1, 7-14

Maybe you've heard the humorous story about a pastor who was having difficulty with his assigned parking space in the church parking lot. People parked in his spot whenever they pleased, even though there was a sign that clearly said, "This space reserved," he thought the sign needed to be more clear, so he had a different sign made, which read, "Reserved for pastor only." Still people ignored it and parked in his space whenever they felt like it. "Maybe this sign should be more forceful," he thought. So, he devised a more intimidating one which announced, "Thou shalt not park here." That sign didn't make any difference either. Finally, he hit upon the words that worked; in fact, nobody ever parked there again. The sign read, "The one who parks here preaches the sermon on Sunday morning!"

I tell you this story not because I'm looking for a parking space, but because most of you would probably hedge at the prospect of such an idea: preaching a sermon on Sunday morning. You would probably feel uncomfortable about doing that because of a lack of experience or training. But what then is your ministry? For you see, there are a variety of ministries in which all the people of a congregation can be involved. These ministries are based on various gifts we have as people. Martin Luther called it the priesthood of all believers. St. Paul once made a list of these gifts when he talked about church people being involved in such things as preaching, teaching, administering, caretaking, praying, or even arbitrating.

The Gospel Reading here, as well as the other two readings selected for this Sunday, set before us a vision of a common ministry that all of us can be a part of. I would call it something like “a ministry of hospitality.”

Let’s begin by looking at this concept of hospitality. All three Bible readings 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. We ought to be *hospitable*. The reading from Proverbs says, do not exalt yourself...do not claim a place. In the second Reading, the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to keep on loving each other as sisters and brothers. “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Finally, today’s Gospel reading brings us the parable about the wedding guests. Jesus warns us that if you immediately claim a place of honor at such a gathering, you had better be prepared to experience some embarrassment when a more honored guest is ushered to your seat, and you are forced to take one of the undesirable spaces at the back of the hall. Then Jesus concludes by saying that if you want to be truly hospitable when you give a luncheon or dinner, you ought not invite your same old friends all the time but rather people who could not repay you, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Jesus is beginning to build a case here for the truth 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, Jesus suggests that you are taking a real chance when you slight certain people; you see, they might just turn out to be angels you did not know about.

On the surface, this is a story about good social manners at a wedding. But its deeper purpose is to remind you and me in the family of God about our calling 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 beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. So, what is this ministry of hospitality?

To help us, 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...entertainment 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. Come and listen to my views and thoughts."

Entertaining is hard, stressful, because through it we perpetuate the myth that we are perfect. We put up a façade saying that we manage our lives perfectly and that our children are perfectly disciplined and obedient.

Hospitality is totally different. We do not seek to portray a 'perfect' image; people can love us in our weakness, relax with us, and enjoy our company.

An even deeper meaning of hospitality emerges when we realize that this word comes from the same source as two similar sounding words, *hospice*” and “*hospital*.” The word *hospice* means *shelter* and the word *hospital* means a *place of healing*. In this light, we can examine some of our own words and actions toward other people. Do my words and actions provide a *shelter* for other persons when they are around us? Or, do my words and deeds promote a sense of *healing* for other people when they are around me? How *hospitable* am I really?

For a moment let’s push the word “*hospice*” to its limits. We are aware that today the word “*hospice*” usually refers to a special kind of care or place meant for people who are dying. People with terminal illness 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. They are dying on the inside; for whatever reason, life is currently treating them harshly and they feel broken. Some are dying just to know someone; they have few, if any friends. Some are dying to feel connected; they don’t feel like they belong to the human race anymore. Some are dying to be affirmed; they are weary from feeling that they amount to nothing. Some are dying to be touched, even if only by eye contact, or by some word of acknowledgement from another human being.

All these people need hospice care; they need the hospitality of the church, because inwardly they are dying. They need a place of shelter, no matter how fleeting, where they can catch another breath of air to sustain them.

There was a pastor who had a favorite slogan that he often repeated in his sermons. He said, “The church is not a country club, it’s more like a hospital.” That’s what Jesus was saying here when he gave us the direction, “do not invite your friends or your rich neighbors...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You and I are not in the church to impress one another or to win power struggles; we are here to minister to one another in our weaknesses. We are here to be *hospitable*.

Now nobody 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 Christ’s 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.” Think of it, “yet sinners...” God did not withhold hospitality from us until we straightened ourselves out. While we were sinners, Christ was hospitable toward us by going to the cross and dying for us, in our place. Noticing our sin, Christ 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 now faced us. Looking into that face we felt sheltered and healed. Looking at his cross we know we are healed - - cleansed and forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ. The cross enables us to follow the divine model of hospitality.

Again, the apostle Paul encourages us toward such a Christly hospitality when he writes to the Philippian Christians in chapter two of his letter. “Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who humbled himself and took on the form of a servant and...became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” In this great passage, Paul reminds us how Jesus fulfilled the lesson of the parable we are considering in this gospel reading. Christ, who is the first, became the last, so that we, the last, might be first, having all our sins washed away by his obedience at the cross.

So now, empowered by the cross of Christ, we each have our own ministry of 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 all other people.

And we should get specific about our own ministry of hospitality. Perhaps, for instance, you have the gift of gab - - the ability to talk at ease with just about anyone. You could be an effective greeter to the strangers who visit our church. You could be that little spark of light to people.

But out of this initial hospitality shown one another in the church needs to blossom a deeper hospitality whereby people come to know that God loves them and cares for them too. In this regard Christian hospitality always finally needs to involve some word of witness to God's love in Christ. I believe, here at Good Shepherd we already have that kind of hospitality and should use it out in the community.

This is another way of saying that Christian hospitality ultimately involves evangelism: 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. As the old hymn puts it, "If you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, you can say he died for all." God bless our ministry – our ministry of hospitality. Amen.

I recently saw a 2 1/2 by 4-inch plaque into which were imbedded three words.

The three words are **PLAY YOUR GAME**. That's my encouragement to you.

God had given each of you the gift of bearing witness, sometimes with words, sometimes with action, sometimes with prayer. That gift is tailored uniquely to you, to be used to carry out God's mission to love and bless the world.

There is no one "right" way to bear this witness; there is only your way, in your setting, with your gifts, all provided by our gracious Creator. I become your full-time pastor today confident that you are a spirit-led congregation.

You have my full support and I will keep you in my prayers just as I pray that you will keep me in your prayers – and together we will grow more deeply in love with our Savior Jesus Christ and then share that love with others. Amen.