

In and Out

Hebrews 13: 1-6, 15, 16

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

August 29, 2010 – UM

I knew at the beginning of the week that it was going to be a busy week for me... we had a funeral here on Tuesday, with all that that entails...

I led a service at Parkland on Wednesday, followed by a worship committee meeting...

I met with Robb & Kareen on Thursday morning about baptism...

I had a wedding rehearsal that evening and a wedding Friday afternoon...

some pastoral visits...

and so as prepared for this morning, I went looking in my files for a sermon that I could recycle...

Guess what!

In the 12 years or so that I have been preaching, which means I have been through the 3 year cycle of lectionary readings at least three times, I have NEVER preached on these passages... so I had nothing in my files that I could reuse!

The reading from Hebrews speaks of not neglecting to show hospitality to strangers for in doing so, we could be entertaining angels unaware...

The gospel reading has Jesus telling us a parable of a wedding banquet... and who is invited...

So in the midst of all that happened this week... I pondered one of my favourite theological subjects... hospitality...

You may remember that one of the things we named as a focus in our visioning process was being a vibrant, open, inclusive community of faith that practices extravagant hospitality.

Hospitality as it relates to our faith community... to the circles of friendship and family in which we all move... in the wider community... and to our country and world.

In ministry, I have the opportunity on a daily basis to interact with those I know and those I don't.

I have the opportunity to both offer hospitality and be the recipient of it.

And I often ponder, what makes someone or a group of 'someones' hospitable?

One of the weddings I presided at this summer was for a couple that I didn't know that well... not someone who is connected in any way to our faith community...

But they and their friends and family were open, gracious people, who made me feel welcome and included, and offered food and drink... even as met for the very first time.

It seemed that to this group of people... a stranger was simply a friend who they hadn't met yet.

There family and friends were like a United Nations in miniature... I have never been to a social gathering where there were as many different ethnic groups represented as there were at that wedding.

There would have been a time, not all that long ago, when that didn't happen.

A time, when those of African, Caucasian, Asian and Aboriginal didn't intermingle at all. When they would have been 'stranger' and 'other.'

I was the recipient of extravagant hospitality... They may not have put it in those terms, but that was how it felt to me.

They may not have articulated in terms of biblical hospitality, but I certainly felt it.

I also had the opportunity this summer to offer biblical hospitality on your behalf.

I received a phone call one day... someone desperately needing some financial help... just on a temporary basis...

The details aren't important... but I am becoming more and more convinced that the heart of Jesus teaching, love God and love neighbour as self really mean feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless...

And we are privileged to be able to offer those things...

We are blessed to have the opportunity to offer that kind of extravagant hospitality...

Hospitality that doesn't expect to be repaid.

Kate Huey-Heck, a United Church of Christ minister writes this in her on-line reflection on these passages.

We have domesticated hospitality, shaped a kind of eco-system of inviting that keeps the welcome circulating among our "own kind" of people, or at least those we can feel comfortable around.

Our generosity toward strangers and all those we might consider "strange" is often offered from a distance, without personal contact.

But Peluso-Verdend reminds us that the "Greek word for hospitality, philoxenia, means 'love of the stranger,'" and "banquet behavior fitting for the reign of God ought to affect dinner invitations even now."

Byars observes that the list of those "strangers" changes from one time and place to another, the ones "whom respectable people expect to turn aside.

Jesus' challenge reaches across boundaries of place and time, calling us to be more aware of those from whom we are inclined to avert our eyes, and to follow him rather than those who baptize common prejudices as virtues"--that is, we are to include at our tables "those who do not take an invitation for granted."

In those moments, we will catch a glimpse of the way things will be in the reign of God, but not because we have condescended to welcome those "beneath" us; rather, we will understand that Jesus has changed "the rules" for, as Dianne Bergant writes, he "redefines" both "honorable behavior" and "honored guests."

It's easy for us to offer hospitality to those whom we are connected through ties of family and friendship... people like Robb Clattenburg who grew up attending UM and his wife Karen and their children, who want their children to experience the nurturing of a faith community.

Important that we do so...

But biblical hospitality does not stop there...

It doesn't even stop at welcoming strangers who look like us, dress like us, talk like us...

Biblical hospitality extends to strangers who don't look, talk and act like us and not just welcoming them into our churches...

But also into our country.

Like a boatload of Tamil refugees...

Biblical hospitality calls us to offer extravagant hospitality without expectation of receiving the same back.

As Kate Huey-Heck goes on to say later in her reflection: *"Be forgetfully generous."*

"When making up our guest lists and deciding how to share the blessings we've received, don't be strategic. Don't go for reciprocity. Be extravagantly, forgetfully generous.

Invite the most unlikely, most unexpected of guests into your home and share that most necessary, most enjoyable experience of eating together.

"You will be blessed," Jesus says.

Eating at table, something that we have ritualized in our services of communion... where all are welcome to share in the banquet.

Where we are all guests of God... and where we are invited, encouraged and challenged to make room for all.

We will be blessed...

May we be a blessing to others...

Thanks be to God for the challenge and opportunity, amen.

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Comments in italics written by Kate Huey Heck at
http://act.ucc.org/site/MessageViewer?dlv_id=31261&em_id=28621.0