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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Hospitality”

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Matthew 22:1–14

22Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

“Hospitality”

Matthew 22:1-14

Writer and researcher Brene Brown tells the story of a day when her daughter Ellen came home from middle school. “One look at her face and I knew something was wrong,” she begins. “How was your day?” Brene asked. “Did something happen?” With that, Ellen burst into tears. “I’m just so sick and tired of being one of the others,” she cried.

Ellen explained that every day at recess her class played soccer. Teams were determined, as they so often are in middle school, by two of the popular kids being anointed team captain and then picking their teammates. Of course, they pick all the best and most popular players first. “I’ll take Kristen.” “Then I’ll take Gus.” “I’ll take Sawyer.” “I want Asher.” When those kids are all accounted for, the captains look at each other and say, casually, “Let’s just split the others.” For weeks now, Ellen had been in that awful group: the others.

“Oh, Ellen,” Brene said, “that is so awful. I know just what you mean about being one of the others.”

“No you don’t,” Ellen fired back. “How could you know what that’s like? You’re famous!”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t know how it feels to be left out.” Then Brene stopped talking and forced herself to just be with her daughter. She let Ellen cry, she listened, she didn’t try to problem solve or make it better. It was hard, but she could tell that Ellen truly appreciated her willingness to be with her in her pain, and that, in some way, it helped.

A few days later, Ellen came home from school with a spring in her step and a grin on her face. As so often happens in middle school, things had shifted, and she was no longer feeling quite so left out. Just as she was telling her mom this, Brene heard the sound of the mail being left at the door. “Just a minute, honey,” she said. She had been waiting all day for the mail because she was expecting a poster advertising an event where she would be speaking along with a bunch of Hollywood celebrities. She’d sent in a head shot for the poster and she was pretty excited to see her picture on the same poster as some of her favorite actors.

She grabbed the canister and sat down on the sofa to unroll the poster, scanning for her name and photo. And scanning. And then scanning again. As she sat there, trying to comprehend what she was seeing, Ellen came in. “Is this the poster for your big event?” she asked. “Yeah,” said Brene. “Where’s your picture?” Ellen

asked. They both sat there, looking at the list of celebrities and their pictures. Underneath the pictures of the main attractions was a list of additional speakers, names but not pictures. Brene and her daughter read through the list, which did not contain Brene's name. At the end of the list was an ellipsis, dot...dot...dot...followed by the words, "and others."

"Oh, Mom," Ellen said. "You're an other!"¹

Maybe it was when you didn't make the team. Maybe it was when you were passed over for the promotion. Maybe it was when you simply couldn't afford to do what everyone else was doing. Maybe it was when you were rejected from your first choice college or grad school. Maybe it was when the person you thought was the *one* didn't feel the same way about you.

One way or another, we all know what it's like to be passed over, left out, rejected. We all know how it feels to be an "other."

The first Christians certainly knew how that feels. The gospel of Matthew was written at a time when there was a huge, and deeply painful, dispute between Jews who had rejected Jesus and those who had embraced him as the Messiah. These earliest Christians didn't identify themselves as Christians at all; they considered themselves faithful Jews who had responded to the invitation God had extended in Jesus Christ. But there was another group of Jews who felt that the faithful response to Jesus was to reject him, to emphatically declare the he was not the Messiah they had been waiting for. These two factions were in serious conflict.

Matthew was writing for the first kind of community, which is why, again and again, the religious leaders are painted in such an unflattering light in his gospel; the community for which this gospel was written was a community whose members felt persecuted, judged, and rejected — often by their family members and friends. This was deeply painful.

It always is.

Over the past two thousand years there have been many, many ways that churches have determined who are "the others." Gender, race, nationality, orientation, socioeconomic status, age, political affiliation...the list goes on and on. And although the church has made great strides in welcoming those who have not always been welcomed, there is no question that we have a long way to go.

¹ Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfect Parenting: Raising Children with Courage, Compassion, and Connection* (audio cd), Sounds True, 2013.

Of course, the church is by no means alone in this. We human beings are experts at sorting ourselves into categories that make sense to us, no matter how offensive this sorting might be. The truth is, this sorting makes us feel more powerful, more comfortable, more in control — like the popular kids choosing the kids for their teams.

I read this week about a new dating app. It's based on apps like Tinder, that allow you to see pictures of eligible men and women in your geographic area, and, with a swipe of your finger left or right, indicate whether you're interested or not. This new app is called *Luxy*. *Luxy* allows people to narrow their search for a date not just by looks but by net worth. The app actually describes itself as "Tinder, without the poor and unattractive."²

We are experts at designating insiders and "others."

In today's parable, a king is determined to fill up his banquet hall with guests to celebrate his son's wedding. This desire is so strong that when the first guests refuse the invitation, he sends out his servants to round up whoever can be found to fill the hall.

"Bring back whoever you can find," he said, "good and bad together. Let all the "others" come in."

God's hospitality breaks down barriers and disregards labels and refuses to separate people into insiders and others. And if we want to experience God's hospitality, if we want to receive the love and honor God offers us, we have to be willing to receive it not just in the presence of those we have classified as "other," but even in the presence of those who have classified us as "other" and tried to prevent us from coming to that table at all.

In other words, as Psalm 23 tells us, if we want God's hospitality, we have to receive it *in the presence of our enemies*.

A preacher had given a sermon one Sunday about what heaven might be like. He described it as a place where we sit down to feast with all of God's children — the ones we love and adore, as well as our worst enemies, the ones we can't stand and the ones who can't stand us.

After the service, as he greeted people leaving the church, a man in the line stopped and said to the preacher, "I didn't like that sermon at all. I refuse to accept that my

² <http://www.businessinsider.com/luxy-dating-app-is-tinder-minus-the-poor-people-2014-10>

enemies are going to be with me in heaven. That is NOT my understanding of heaven.”

The preacher looked at him for a moment and then said, “No, for you, that would be hell.”

What does it take for us to experience God’s boundary-crossing hospitality as heaven rather than hell?

Well, the strange twist at the end of the parable gives us a clue.

It is understandable to us that the king is incensed when his elite subjects casually refuse an invitation to the royal wedding. We get that. When the king invites you to a party, how dare you refuse?

It is also understandable that when the first invitations are refused, the king invites “the others.” The food has been prepared, after all, and someone ought to eat it.

What doesn’t make sense is why the king gets so bent out of shape when one of those others isn’t wearing the right clothes to the party. Weren’t these people brought in off the streets, after all? How could the king expect them to have on the proper attire?

Jesus is letting us know that getting an invitation to God’s party isn’t so exceptional. It turns out this is a party to which *everyone* is invited. Jesus is also telling us that accepting the invitation isn’t enough either. You have to come dressed to party. If we’re going to come to God’s celebration, then God expects us, well, to *party*. To participate, to partake, to mix and mingle with the other guests, whether or not we have anything in common with them, whether or not they consider us “the others.”

This improbable mix of people is what makes the kingdom of God so utterly different from the world we live in.

It is what has the potential to make the church so different from the rest of our lives — this unusual, unexpected, uncategorizable group of people who willingly come together to encounter God.

Peter Storey was the former Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and President of the South African Council of Churches.

He tells the story of a phone call he once received in the early hours of the morning telling him that Ike Moloabi, one of his black clergy in a very racist town, had been arrested by the secret police. Storey got into the car, picked up another minister, and went looking for Ike. They found him in prison and when they demanded to see

him, a large white Afrikaner guard took them to a little room where they found Ike sitting on a bench looking terrified.

Storey said to the guard, “We are going to have Communion,” and took out of his pocket a little chalice and a tiny little bottle of Communion wine and some bread in a plastic bag. He spread his handkerchief on the bench and prepared the table before them and then began to recite the liturgy.

When it was time for the invitation, he said to the guard, “This table is open to all, so if you would like to share with us, please feel free to do so.” The guard must have been touched in some deep religious place, because he nodded. Storey prepared the bread and the wine and noticed that Ike was beginning to come to life a little. Then Storey handed the bread and the cup to Ike because one always gives the Sacrament first to the least of Christ’s brothers or sisters—the ones that are hurting the most—and Ike ate and drank.

Next Storey offered bread and the cup to the guard, the stranger in their midst. You don’t need to know too much about South Africa to understand how white Afrikaner racists felt about letting their lips touch a cup from which a black person had just drunk. The guard was in crisis: he would either have to overcome his prejudice or refuse the means of grace. After a long pause, he took the cup and sipped from it. Then Storey took something of a liberty with the truth and said, “In the Methodist liturgy, we always hold hands when we say the grace,” and very stiffly, the warden reached out his hand and took Ike’s, and there they were in a little circle, holding hands, while he said the ancient words of benediction, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us *all*.”³

Theologian Karl Barth put it this way, “It all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that he who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore *festively*, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to...appear at all.”⁴

The invitations have gone out. The table is set. The music is playing. God is ready to party, with us *all*. Are we ready too?

Amen.

³ Calum McLeod relates this story in his sermon “The Teachable Kingdom,” at the Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, November 28, 2010. The story is quoted from Peter Storey’s article “Table Manners for Peacebuilders” in *Conflict and Communion*, pp. 61-62.

⁴ Quoted in Lance Pape’s commentary on Matthew 22:1-14 for October 12, 2014 on workingpreacher.org,



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