

Sermon, Luke 14:1, 7-14 - Alex Johnson

It really is amazing how Christian we have become. We live in a place where the poor have at least some kind of safety net. For example, when I worked in Edinburgh, we were frequently told by councillors that there was a bed for every homeless person who needed one. The crippled, the lame, and the blind, are terms we are not comfortable using because they reduce a person down to their vulnerabilities and not their character or strengths. Though there is more to be done, we do our best to create a society where disabilities are only as limiting as they can unavoidably be. This culture of hospitality is also on display in our churches. A few years ago, when the start of the war in Ukraine caused energy costs to rise, churches across the land opened their doors to become 'warm spaces'. Even within the normal rhythms of life, our buildings here in Kinross are used to bring people together whether through the ministry of the day centre or the craft group or the guild or stepping stones...you never want to leave anyone out but hopefully you get the picture. You could argue we have even taken the ethics of our reading today to the point that we devalue our own altruism, questioning whether the promise of a heavenly reward undermines the selflessness of our behaviour.

From the divine seeds of community that are embedded within our DNA, from our biological core as social creatures, we have expanded our moral obligation from our families to our communities to our nation and to the world. We appreciate our responsibility to others even if we are unsure as to how best balance those different layers of need. As a society, we have expanded our obligations, even if we fear that they might currently be shrinking.

The Jesus-ethic we have read about this morning has had such an impact on our society and our community that we can literally see it. It exists not just on the pages of our Bibles but in our nation and in our parish. We have taken it to heart, even in secular culture. As we would put it, we recognise that when we serve the least, we serve Christ himself.

In doing so, we are actively living within the economy of God, whereby a transactional understanding of human relationships is overcome by reunderstanding of ourselves as existing within the provision and love of God. As we affirm in our weekly prayer of dedication, what we give comes from God in the first place. Through this, we are able to justify these acts of hospitality in the face of our own anxieties and concerns. These marvellous acts of care are made intelligible by our conviction that we are held within the embrace of a God who is both guest and host. That our Lord secures for us the land of milk and honey while simultaneously knocking on our door empty handed. That the unfathomable love we have been shown in Jesus Christ is interwoven with the love we in turn show others. We live in this way because we have bound ourselves to the divine economy as expressed by Jesus in this morning's passage.

Without a doubt, there are cracks in the system and questions to be asked. But we can celebrate! Celebrate both the love of God and the love of God displayed through our own examples of hospitality. Whether it is enshrined in the law of the land or enacted in the lives of you seated before me. At whatever level they occur, they are examples of the kingdom of God.

Yet, we hesitate to draw a line under any passage of Scripture. For that would be closing our ears to the voice of God, to the call of discipleship within our lives. So what have we to hear from this passage? What little streams of consciousness did those words of Jesus begin in your head?

I would venture this: our reading this morning does not only describe provision for the poor and vulnerable. It also describes hospitality. Within it we had advice for both guests and hosts. We had encouragement not just to provide but to encounter others and form our relationships with one another around humility and service. This passage, including the bit we left out, describes an open stance towards humanity. To the immediate and personal nature of encountering other human beings. I am glad to witness and celebrate the altruism of this church and our society, genuinely glad, but there is another level to this passage.

Part of our challenge this morning is that these words from the Gospel of Luke describe a situation that is unlikely to happen in our society. In our world, there is a very low chance that the domains of a dinner party, a pulpit, and a doctor's surgery would overlap. Yet, in Luke 14 here we are, in a Pharisee's house with an itinerant preacher whose conversation is interrupted by someone seeking medical attention. There is an openness to this pharisee's house which is simply not replicated in our culture.

There are very good reasons for this. For one, as I have already described, we have institutions to support the vulnerable. I am not qualified to provide medical care, if you knock on my door, I literally cannot help you beyond giving you a plaster. Therefore, it is utter nonsense for someone to knock on my door. For two, there are no contact points for strangers to meet members of the community. If a stranger comes to Kinross, we wouldn't know about it and in all likelihood they wouldn't need to be known. Apart from telling them to go fill up their car at Stewarts and Smarts rather than pay the service station prices, most travelling through will have little need of us. For three, our houses are not safe spaces for hospitality. Their privacy makes them vulnerable to exploitation by either host or guest. Both can take advantage of being behind closed doors. This scene took place in a different culture. No matter how strong our commitment to hospitality, this is not something we can replicate and perhaps with good reason.

Nevertheless, it stands as a challenge to us. We need to find a way to translate it into our culture. For while we have gained much in the provision for the vulnerable and in our own very welcome personal space, the challenge of our time is to not just offer services but hospitality. To create opportunities for outsiders to become insiders, unknown people to become known. Christine Pohl, who wrote a book on recovering the Christian tradition of hospitality wrote that "We seldom notice how substantially bounded our...worlds are - how few "unknown" strangers we welcome, nor do we recognize how frequently the boundaries are socioeconomic." (Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovery Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 92)

Therefore, our task is to be like the Pharisee, because it is the Pharisee that enables our passage to unfold. For it was the Pharisee who hosted Jesus. There is an implication that he saw Jesus as some kind of equal, a fellow religious man. Jesus' strangeness is mediated by his reputation, by their shared passion. Yet by inviting Jesus in, the Pharisee is confronted by the needs of a man with swollen legs and arms. Jesus is shocked by their lack of hospitality towards the man, he points out that you wouldn't think twice about helping your child out of a well on the Sabbath, yet apparently this man's need raises questions within this dinner party.

The atmosphere does not improve. Jesus dislikes how the meal is turning into an opportunity to consolidate social status and encourages guests to be humble. Turning to his host, he argues that he should not be encouraging this behaviour, instead he should be seeking to serve, and serve even those who cannot return the favour. The Pharisee's hospitality is rather upended as Jesus challenges its principles.

Yet, I would argue, we are still called to be this Pharisee. Called to be bridgebuilders, to be hosts that create connections between different parts of society. We are called to be challenged by Jesus, who in being one with the abundantly loving God, simply does not make the same calculations that we so naturally make.

There are those seated here today that model this kind of hospitality. Not recklessly opening themselves up but able to be present, to build connections. To be present before people. Perhaps, for the rest of us, we can learn from them or ensure that when bridges have been made by others we openly share with the strangers they bring. I would suggest that we all need to be cognizant of the patterns of our society that place boundaries on our social circles and to take faltering steps towards offering hospitality. We need to consider who the bridge builders are and support their ministry. This is part of our mission within the economy of God.

So consider this, I urge you. Whether this skill of hospitality plays out within the activities of this church or within your WhatsApp groups or beyond, as I'm sure it already does. Let us be aware of not just offering a service, but hospitality. Amen.