

First UCC Northfield
Sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14
Rev. Lauren Baske Davis

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

14 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon

As I wrote in our newsletter The Chronicle this week, thank you so much for the time away to be with my family on vacation. We took the trip of a lifetime to Scotland for two weeks, while my spouse Jon is on sabbatical. We had time together and share memories we will not soon forget. Thank you again for the space to find rest and renewal.

Now I'm not bringing up vacation only because of how thankful I am, nor how recent it was. I bring it up because while we were delighted by the castles, the highlands, the beaches, and more, what really warmed our hearts was the generosity of spirit, the hospitality of the people. The culture felt a little like Minnesotans in winter who shovel one another's driveways or carry shovels in the car in case they come upon someone who's car slipped and ended up in the ditch. Or who show up at your door in the summers with flowers, berries they've picked, or extra produce from their gardens.

We stayed at Airbnbs/VRBOs on our trip, and upon arrival at each place, hosts would let us know: “we've set you up with tea and coffee, sugar, and there's milk in the fridge since you'll be needing a cup after your travels!” One host, who had a sign posted on the Airbnb cottage that said in Gaelic, “*Céad Míle Fáilte* (kayd MEE-luh FAHL-cheh): “A Hundred Thousand Welcomes,” put homemade jam and butter in the fridge with the milk, as well as candy and fresh baked bread on the counter. While we were relaxing on the patio of this cottage, the host, John, came out and said, “Hey! Do you like beer or whisky? Let me get you some!” Upon returning with these gifts, he asked what we'd be doing. Learning we were going on the open air ferries to some of the local islands, he said, oh you need a flask!” “A flask?!” we said. “You know, to put some hot tea in!” And he disappeared again coming back with a really nice big thermos that would hold several cups of tea to keep us warm on our windy ferry ride.

The people in Scotland we met went the extra mile, to quote another bible story, but in a way that seemed to come from a sense of “we're all in this together.” There are a lot of socio-political reasons why Scottish culture is the way it is, but I will say that having been on the

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receiving end of hospitality we couldn't repay as travelers, and experiencing it again and again, I've come to see our scripture passage in a new light.

Jesus has been invited to the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, not because of his power and prestige, necessarily, but because of his social capital among the people: his influence and remarkable teachings. He quickly notices that the guests choose places of honor for themselves, rather than inviting others to take places of honor. The Roman table rules of the day were highly structured around power, prestige, and hierarchy. As you can imagine, no one wanted to be at the bottom.

Our scripture notes that Jesus sees what is going on. He sees one-upping and competitive social climbing and discrimination. And he tells a parable, "When you're invited to a wedding banquet, go and sit at the last place. Maybe you'll be surprised and be asked to move, but don't assume a better position than someone else. At first glance, this just seems like well-mannered behavior that Jesus was putting forth for guests to emulate. But it's not about manners even though it looks like it at first appearance.

Mark Yaconelli, who is a youth ministry guru of sorts, tells the story of attending a church council meeting to talk about youth ministry. There, he asked adults – *why did you start coming to church?* Many responded that they came because they thought it would be good for their kids to learn Christian values and morals. Mark responded, "You know, the purpose of youth ministry isn't just to help people learn morality, as important as that is; it's to help them enter into the alternative way of life that Jesus offers." A way of life where no one's identity comes from what clothes they wear, or car they drive, or job they have, or grade they get. A way of life where we all share the same identity – beloved child of God. Youth Ministry is to help young people see and live into that different social order, different way of being in the world.

He got some push back from his council members. One of them, who was unprepared for this, said, "Umm...I think that is well and good, but I think that is more than we're after. We just want our kids to learn the 10 commandments and be kind to others." "Yeah," another said, "We don't want our kids to be Jesus, we just want them to participate in church."

Mark paused, but then said that if they wanted their kids to learn morals, they could probably take them to the local Scouts program. But that youth ministry isn't about morals or good behavior, nor is it preventative medicine to declining church membership. It's about walking alongside youth and helping them discover a different way of doing life in Jesus' ways. And it's about finding meaningful relationships along the way that different way of doing life, seeing the world in a loving way, with an equitable social order.¹

In the same way it was easy for people at Mark Yaconelli's church to think youth ministry is about learning morals and coming to church, it's easy to think this passage is about table manners. Both youth ministry as Mark Yaconelli clarified, and our scripture on first appearance might look like they're about morals and being a good person. They are both, however, more about living life with a different perception. About putting on a generous spirit, a lens of love, and using it to create a more equitable social order, and a more loving perception

¹ Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, p. 39-40.

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of the world. How do we know this?

Well, Jesus goes on to say, "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor." When we do that, we create a circle, right? A giving and receiving of people who can give equally so everyone gives and gets something. But as Glennon Doyle says, the most inclusive shape isn't a circle, it's a U. It's not a closed shape. It's open, leaving space for others to join. That's more like what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus takes it further. He says, next time, "invite some people who never get invited out, the sick, the non-traditional, the awkward, the marginalized, the ones society blames for its problems. Share a meal—because sharing a meal was a form of social status and honor in itself—and get to know people who can't return the favor. And you'll experience true blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned in a different way." It's not about power, about one giving, and another receiving. Again, it's not about table manners, and it's not about charity. Jesus is saying, give people places of honor, and be generous with them not because they're someone important or because they're someone's daughter or someone's brother, someone you know or have networked with. Give because everyone is someone. Reorient the entire social order, Jesus is saying. See things differently.

Now, I know my family and I were incredibly privileged to get to travel. The people who were generous with us in Scotland knew we were able to travel but they didn't know us from anyone. They prepared generous gifts for travelers coming to stay in their homes, having no clue who we were. And we couldn't repay what they gave us in Scotland. The homemade jam, the bread, the thoughtfulness of the tea "flask." They handed us precious things not because of who we were, or anything we did, but simply because we were someone and they chose to be giving. The personal and social generosity was a gift given freely.

But what if, as Jesus is indicating, we take generosity and hospitality from a personal or social scale to a systemic scale? What if we reorient—balance—the social order systemically? I can tell you what that looks like, too. It looks like walking to a local medical clinic first thing in the morning after being up all night with your child who is sick with Covid; when you are scared, a foreigner, and have no appointment. That's also something we did in Scotland. In a social structure that seems more oriented toward generosity and equity, that experience looks like the clinic somehow fitting us in to their already booked schedule just 20 min after we had arrived. It looks like a kind doctor who tells you it's not your fault, that she just had Covid too, and that unfortunately it's just kind of everywhere.

At the end of the appointment, I was still frazzled from being up all night with our sick kiddo and I just walked out the clinic door without checking with the front desk or paying for our appointment. When I realized what I'd done, I felt terrible. So I called the

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clinic. I apologized for how I'd just walked out, and asked what we owed them. The woman on the phone, warmly laughed. "You're in the UK, dear, healthcare is free here! You don't owe us anything!" There was no way we could've paid back the UK for what it gave us, not just in experience and beauty, but in hospitality and in a generosity that we may only partially pay forward.

But I tell you this story because I want you to perceive what Jesus is doing here. The beginning of the scripture says Jesus sees the way the guests are taking places of honor. Then he asks people to change their vision. To stop seeing that way altogether. To stop worrying about public perception and how others see you, and see what *could* be! Jesus' point is that not everyone has access to what they need because the social order, the system isn't necessarily set up to be fair.

True generosity, humility, and hospitality will always rub up against customs like reserved tables, priority seating, corner offices, VIP treatment, and social preoccupation with who's in who's out. These perks help us forget the sacred story that all, all, all matter equally. What would it be like, Jesus wants us to ask ourselves, to care as much about the person on the street as you do your own family? What would it be like to realize that we—the world—belong to each other so deeply? That we are so connected? Or to put it another way, that we are each someone.

Let us go this week asking ourselves on personal, social and systemic levels, what does a generous hospitality, "*Céad Míle Fáilte* (kayd MEE-luh FAHL-cheh): "A Hundred Thousand Welcomes," look like? Try it on this week, with a stranger, with someone who does not have the same resources or opportunities you do, with someone you just don't think deserves it? Let's change the way we see, put on a lens of love, and put it into practice. May it be so.