

Places in the Heart

Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "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; and 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. But 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

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They were all gathered for worship in the tiny, simple, church in a small Texas town in 1935. The preacher read from 1 Corinthians...love is patient, love is kind, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And then it was time to share in Communion. As the bread and wine trays were passed along in the pews, each person said, "peace of God," as the trays went from one believer to another. It seemed as if everyone from town—and beyond—was there that Sunday morning—devout believers, a black drifter handyman, a man blinded in the Great War, black field workers, and a few men struggling to live

a good Christian life yet were secretly members of the KKK. There was a man having an affair, a banker trying to foreclose on the farm of a recent widow suddenly raising two young children, and a woman who was crushed to death by a car in a recent tornado. The Sheriff husband of the recent widow passed the tray of Communion bread to the young black man who had accidentally shot and killed him and so he was immediately hung to die, and he too said, “peace of God.”

Perhaps you remember this unexpected and powerful closing scene from the 1984 movie, ‘Places in the Heart.’ In spite of this compelling final scene of God’s radical and gracious hospitality and human reconciliation, it is mostly remembered for Sally Field’s acceptance speech at the Oscars which is often misquoted as, “You really like me. You really, really like me.”

What is profoundly striking is that as they all celebrated the sacrament of Communion together, as they all passed the peace of God, as they all heard what love truly is, they all experienced what God’s love truly is. Children and adults, the poor and the well-to-do, the uneducated and educated, the sinners and the saints, the living and the dead, all had a place in the heart of God. Absolutely everyone has a place at the table. Everyone is welcome at God’s table. We are all both honored and humbled to have our place of mutual love in God’s heart.

Having a place in God’s heart, no questions asked, and no strings attached is what Jesus was speaking about as he urged the Pharisees--as he urges us--to not pay attention to superficial status markers, not to pay attention to false values or irrelevant perceptions, but to see others as God sees us, to welcome and love others just as Jesus welcomes and loves us.

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

But when you give a banquet, when you open your doors and your arms to offer hospitality, do not limit your guest list but welcome in the poor- those hungering to overcome food insecurity, as well as those poor in spirit as they have been worn down and beaten and in need of acceptance and attention and affirmation. Invite those crippled and lame in their bodies by illness, injury or aging, and so are challenged to do what they once did, and those who are crippled by oppressive structures that link unfair moral significance to wealth and prosperity. Invite in those blinded not only in their outer vision but those who in their inner vision are unable to see a way to hope, to equality, to forgiveness, to grace.

This wild and radical hospitality, this mutual love, is good table manners for living faithfully, for living as Christians in our complex world. We are reminded that unlike so many hierarchical systems—in Jesus’ time and in our own—we are here to serve, not to be served. The banquet table of God’s hospitality is a call—and indeed at times a challenge --to show hospitality to others whether or not they are like us, whether or not they like us. We might just glimpse the divine and entertain angels unawares. In ‘Companions on the Way’, Susan Grace¹ writes that, “We who follow Jesus should never forget we follow one who was judged and ultimately excluded for who he ate with and what he offered for food and drink. We therefore also must keep opening the circle until all of creation and all souls belong and know they belong.” When we open the circle of creation we remember that “God as creator has imbued every aspect of creation with the spark of the divine and sees only the preciousness rather than the performance of each of us”....”and that God is committed to faithful mutual love even when we are not and therefore cannot, will not, abandon us even when we abandon God, our neighbor and ourselves.

If you were among the congregation passing the Communion trays in the pew, who would you be *honored* to receive the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, from? Who has hurt, offended or denied you, yet could begin to heal the wounds with the welcome and grace of the body of Christ?

I would be honored to receive the tray of the bread of heaven from Will, who when I was poor in spirit, challenged, worn down and beaten by a very difficult situation, denied me any encouragement, attention, or affirmation to look forward with hope. In taking the tray of the bread of heaven, my prayer would be that hardened hearts would be softened and closed minds would be broken open in understanding and compassion.

If you were among the congregation passing the Communion trays in the pew, who would you be *humbled* by passing the blood of Christ, the cup of blessing to? Who have you hurt, offended or denied, yet you could begin to heal the wounds with the welcome and grace of the blood of Christ?

I would be humbled to pass the cup of blessing to Judy, a long ago former friend. Our religious differences grew deeper and deeper apart until we could no longer agree to disagree. We each saw the beliefs of the other as values and judgements that blinded, crippled and tore away at the very person we had called 'friend.' But I now think of her from time to time as the Christian landscape of our country has become so divisive, so contentious. Judy and I lost too much common ground between us to hold onto a once treasured and enjoyed friendship. My prayer in humbly passing the cup of blessing would be for finding ways to be as Jesus had prayed, that we may all be one.

And to you I pass the peace of God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/recognizing-the-divine-in-the-other>