

Hospitality and the Human Heart
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 15, 2019- AM Sermon
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Luke 7:36-50

Last week we began our hospitality series at this table, which was perfect. We remembered that whatever hospitality we might practice, whatever welcome we bring, flows from the welcome we receive at this table from God himself. Here we experience the costly, gritty hospitality of Jesus, and we are brought closer to God and brought closer to each other. So last week we talked about the source of hospitality and we said that this table is the source, or more precisely, Jesus, the Lord of this table is the source of our hospitality. Today, building on that beginning, I want to talk about the heart of hospitality, and by that I mean: what does hospitality look like and feel like in the human heart. When we are full of Jesus' hospitality, what's the state of our heart? For that, I know of no better Bible passage than Luke 7:36-50.

Now maybe you don't think of this as a passage about hospitality, but believe me it is. In the middle of the passage in verses 44-47 Jesus confronts his host, Simon the Pharisee. And what does he criticize Simon for? He criticizes Simon for his crummy hospitality. *"Simon, when I arrived at your house you didn't give me a welcoming kiss, you didn't give me any water for my feet, you didn't give me any oil for my head."* In that culture, those three things represented basic hospitality. In that culture, if you had guests over you were expected to *greet them with a kiss, give them water to wash their feet, and give them some oil to make their face shine*. This was the ancient equivalent of shaking your guests' hand and taking their coat. But Simon gave Jesus none of these things. By contrast, Jesus praises the welcome given to him by the sinful prostitute. *Not only did she greet him with a kiss, she showered him with kisses. She didn't just offer him water for his feet, she bathed them with her tears. She didn't just give him a little oil for his face, she poured perfume on him.* This woman overflowed in welcome! *Why are the two welcomes so different?* Because Simon and this prostitute have different things going on in their hearts.

What's in Simon's heart? What's going on inside of him as he brings Jesus to his table? I would say that Simon's heart is full of evaluation. I think it's pretty clear from the text that Simon is in measurement mode. Simon is sizing up his guests to see if they're the right sort of people. He's clearly doing that with the sinful woman. It doesn't take long for his heart to judge. He sees her and he knows right away that this prostitute is the wrong sort of person. You don't want a person like this at dinner. You don't even want to touch her. Simon is also evaluating Jesus. Jesus doesn't make his standards either. *"Well everyone said he was a prophet, but he's clearly no prophet or he would not let that prostitute touch him."* So we can fairly say that Simon's heart is full of a sense of his own decency and he's evaluating those around him to see if they're decent too. From his heart of evaluation, you get a kind of community: Let's call Simon's table the table of the crossed arms. You come to Simon's table and he might smile at you and tell you he's glad you're here, but you have this sense that everyone around you is looking you up and down, arms crossed, deciding if you're the right sort of person. Not hospitable.

But now what about the heart of the sinful woman, the one whose hospitality Jesus praised? What was inside of her to make her so welcoming? Jesus tells us. Her heart is full of love. And it's full of love of a certain kind: her heart is full of the love that comes from knowing that your sins are forgiven. Her heart is full of the love that comes from knowing that she'd made a complete mess of her life. She thought that she'd ruined everything, but now Jesus comes

along, forgives her and gives her a second chance! Her heart is full of the love that comes from having an unpayable debt, a crushing load pushing you down, and Jesus comes along and pays the whole thing and sets you free! In Jesus' own words, her heart is full of love because she's been forgiven much, and now she wants to pour her love out on others. If Simon's table is the community of the crossed arms, this woman's table (which is also this communion table) is the community of the forgiven hearts. It's a very hospitable place.

So, what does Jesus teach us about a hospitable heart? He tells us *that at the center of a hospitable heart is a knowledge of your own sin*. At the center of a hospitable heart is a knowledge of your own brokenness, and how that sin and brokenness have been forgiven in Jesus. I said last week that Christian hospitality is more than having some people over for fun, Christian hospitality aims at what is broken in people. Hospitality has the word hospital in it, which means that when you show hospitality to them you want your welcome to have healing purpose. In today's passage, Jesus adds to that teaching. Not only does your hospitality aim at what is broken in others, it comes out of what used to be broken in you. It makes sense. If all people ever see in us and our community is our strength and our decency and our excellence, they will be impressed, but they will also be intimidated. If all we ever show to others is our strength and our decency, they will not want to show us their vulnerability and their need. True hospitality is one broken person meeting another broken person at the feet of Jesus and knowing that He is the one who can heal their hurt and set them free.

This is what the catechism teaches. Mike read part of the second question and answer of the Heidelberg catechism this morning. Remember what it said? What must you know to live and die in the joy of the comfort of your salvation? How great my sin and misery are? The center of Christian joy and the center of Christian community is knowing your sin and misery and how it's been forgiven by Jesus. Knowing your sin and misery is not, 'woe is me I'm a wretch,' it's 'Thank you Lord that your love can heal a person like me!'

Jesus must really want us to get this point, because He brings it up again and again in the gospel of Luke. The contrast between crossed arms of Simon and the forgiven heart of this woman shows up in other places. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is one place. The Pharisee is full of his own excellence and decency and he fails to connect with God. The tax collector knows how great his sin and misery are and he is justified. Another is the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son is like the sinful woman. He has been forgiven much, and so he sings and dances as he enjoys the welcome, the hospitality, of his father's house. The older son plays the role of Simon. He stands out in the darkness with his arms crossed refusing to join the party. He can't enter the circle of his father's hospitality because his heart is full of his own decency and achievement. He has no sense of himself as a forgiven sinner saved by grace. He doesn't know how great his sin and misery are and so he can't do real hospitality. Whoever has been forgiven much loves much. True Christian community, deep Christian community includes our weakness, our vulnerability, our brokenness.

There is a special kind of loneliness that afflicts people who only ever connect with others on the level of strength. Every church has men and women who are very accomplished and connected, men and women who have lots of people to talk to at coffee time, but who are lonely because people only know them by their strengths. A successful businessman, gives generously of his time and his money. He serves on committees, he's been both an elder and a deacon, he is asked to serve on community boards and he almost always says yes. He invited to important civic functions and fundraising events. Everyone knows his name. Everyone says, 'What a great guy!' Yet he still feels lonely. He has a son who suffers from terrible anxiety,

anxiety so crippling he can barely work. That son lives like a recluse in his apartment on the other side of the state. His daughter lives on the other side of the country. She's not married, but she's living with her boyfriend. Hasn't gone to church in years. Every night, worry about these kids floods his heart, and he has no one to share it with. In the morning, he dresses up his pain in a suit and a smile goes out into a world where everyone tells him how great he is and it just makes him feel lonelier because it does nothing for the real pain of his heart.

Do you know how many of our successful neighbors fit some version of this story? So many. Can you sense what it would mean to them to find a community of open vulnerable people who were honest about their own pain, who accepted him in his pain and who came together every week to fall at the feet of Jesus for forgiveness and renewal? Do you have any idea how much love would flow in a community who lived with that kind of vulnerability?

Jean Vanier is a great modern prophet of this kind of vulnerable, open community. I mentioned him last week and read a quote from one of his books. Jean Vanier is the founder of L'Arche. L'Arche is a worldwide organization that runs homes for developmentally disabled adults. These are profoundly disabled adults who need help and care in every area of their life. L'Arche is unique because the developmentally disabled adults live together with the 'abled' adults. They all eat together, and worship together and practice community together. You might think that the able adults are there because they are the strong ones. You might think that the flow of care is all in one direction: from the abled to the disabled. You would be wrong. The need is on both sides. The disabled adults need the care and physical strength of the able-bodied, but the able-bodied need the openness and vulnerability of the disabled. The disabled give the abled the gift of vulnerability. Successful people-lawyers doctors, businesspeople - come to l'Arche to stay for a season. They come out of environments where it's always strength, strength, strength. They arrive at L'Arche and the disabled adults greet them with such openness, such affection, such love that they are disarmed. The disabled adults at L'Arche don't care about your resume. They don't care that you're a partner in a law firm, or an important bishop in a church. They have no interest in your company's impressive sales figures. They have been accepted by Jesus, they are full of the joy and love of Jesus, and they just want to share that with you. The powerful and the successful are often changed by their time at L'Arche. They realize that they are not creatures of strength. They realize that they too are just dependent children sustained by the grace of a loving God.

Whoever has been forgiven much, loves much. How can we make it so that LaGrave is a place of the sort of vulnerability that leads to real hospitality? I used to be in a group of ministers, and every week we would get together to support one another. There were 5 of us and every week we'd simply go around the table and ask each other three questions: How is it going with your family? How is it going with your work? How is it going with God? We promised to answer these questions truly. And at the end we would bring all of the stuff to the feet of Jesus. It was so simple and it was so great. I felt completely welcomed, completely at home when I was with those guys.

I wonder: Do you have anywhere in your life where someone asks you those questions and takes the time to listen to your answers? If you don't, I'm guessing you are a lonely person. I wonder if we could make that a goal: to become a church where every one of us could find a place where people can ask each other these questions and answer them sincerely. There are places where this can happen. There are places where it is happening. It's happening in Bible studies, it happening between friends over a cup of coffee, it's happening in prayer groups. I hope it can happen more. I hope LaGrave can become a place of open hearted community for all

of us. A, place where we can share our needs, bring them to the feet of Jesus, and know ourselves as part of the community of the beloved.

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