

Hospitality and Boundaries
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
November 3 2019-AM Service
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Mark 11:15-19

Over the course of our hospitality series, we've heard the call to hospitality throughout the Bible, but some of the strongest hospitality examples have come from Jesus himself. Jesus who ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus who welcomed little children. Jesus who said that when you feed the hungry and welcome the stranger you welcome Him. We've looked at all sorts of texts where Jesus is radically welcoming and open with all sorts of people.

But did you know that there are two passages in Scripture where Jesus threw someone out of His house? There are two places where Jesus gives a guest in His Father's house the heave-ho. One of those places is in a story. In Matthew 22 Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet. After the original guests all reject their wedding invitation, the king invites the riff raff from the street corners. 'The good and the bad' are brought into the feast. But after the party has started, the king finds a man who is not wearing wedding clothes. Most commentators think this lack of wedding clothes is a symbol of a man who wasn't living in the way of the king and his household. The badly dressed/badly behaving man is chucked out of the party and into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That's one place where someone gets the heave-ho. The second place is our passage.

Well, Jesus seems somewhat less hospitable here than usual, doesn't He? Why does Jesus chuck the moneychangers and the merchants out of His Father's house? When I was a kid I thought it was because they were running a business in the temple. And that's certainly part of why Jesus is angry. But if you want to understand what really sets Him off, you have to look at the bit of Scripture when He yells and when He's flipping the tables. As the merchants and the moneylenders scatter, Jesus is shouting Isaiah 56:7 at them. "*My temple shall be a house of prayers for all nations!!*" That's a quote from the middle of a prophecy about how God wants the gentiles to come to the temple and learn His ways. The temple is supposed to be welcoming to Gentiles. In fact, there was a court for the Gentiles at the temple. It was the outermost court, and Gentiles who loved Israel's Lord were invited to come into that court and offer sacrifices and share in the worship. But now the Gentiles can't come to the temple and they can't worship because those merchants and moneylenders have clogged the court of the Gentiles with their market stalls. That's why Jesus is so table-flippin' angry! These merchants are preventing the Gentiles from coming into the Father's house and the Father's house is supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations! Jesus knows that this is NOT what His Father wants so He starts shouting Scripture and taking names.

There's a lot going on here, but for our purposes, this story shows us a really important part of good Christian Hospitality. This story reminds us that good Christian hospitality has boundaries. Good Christian hospitality needs boundaries. That's what I want to talk about this morning: hospitality and boundaries. In fact, Christian hospitality has two kinds of boundaries: the boundaries of character and the boundaries of capacity. Character and Capacity.

Mark 11 is a good example of the first kind of boundary. This story shows us that hospitality needs the boundary of character. We are called to give wide welcome to all sorts of folk in our midst, but when they enter our space they are not coming into neutral and empty territory; they are coming into our Father's house, and our Father has a defined character. The Father has a distinct way of doing things in His house. There are things that the Father loves: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The father loves generosity and sacrifice. The Father loves humility and forgiveness. There are things the Father hates: cruelty, lying, vengefulness. The Father hates it when members of his household let their desire for stuff, sex, and status run their life. The Father hates swaggering pride. Live in His household for a while, and you will understand that there is a way of doing things here. The door of the Father's house is open wide, but once inside you find yourself in a family with a particular character and that character forms you. Our God is both wide in His welcome and strong in His character. And if you come into His house and push against His character, you should expect to be challenged.

You see, this same dynamic in the Old Testament laws. In this sermon series, we've already seen how the Law of God, commands us to welcome the stranger and foreigner. Israel was supposed to leave the margins

of their field so that the foreigners and the poor would be able to glean (Leviticus 19:9-10). Israel was supposed to invite the foreigners to share in their festivals (Deuteronomy 16:14). Israel was supposed to include foreigners in their celebration of the Sabbath—they were supposed to have a day off like everyone else. (Exodus 20:8-10) “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” Leviticus 19:34. So the law prescribes a wide welcome. But once the foreigners were welcomed in, they were required to observe the household rules. The laws are clear about that too. Leviticus 17:10– “I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people.” Numbers 9:14 – “A foreigner residing among you is also to celebrate the Lord’s Passover in accordance with its rules and regulations. You must have the same regulations for both the foreigner and the native-born.” Numbers 15:16–“The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the foreigner residing among you.” Once in the house, they have to learn the household ways. Our God is both wide in His welcome and strong in His character. And if you come into His house and push against His character, you should expect to be challenged.

Ultimately, strong character makes for a better welcome. That’s certainly true in friendship. Sometimes young people, whose identities and character are still forming, are so desperate for friendships that, in an effort to get people to like them, they become social chameleons. Which is another way of saying they are all welcome and no defined character: “Be my friend! I will be whoever you want me to be!” How do those young people do socially? Do people want to be their friend? No. We are drawn to people who know who they are! We are drawn to people with well-defined characters and passions and interests.

Free friendship advice to all you young people. Don’t be afraid to have a strong character. Love what you love and don’t be ashamed of it. And if you don’t love something, don’t pretend that you do. If you love something unusual, like Mongolian throat singing, tell other people about the awesomeness of Mongolian throat singing! Invite them to listen to Mongolian throat singing with you! Send them your Mongolian Throat Singing playlist and don’t be afraid. They may think you are weird, but they will think you are a real person. A really healthy and inviting person is someone who has a wide welcome and a defined character.

That sounds like Jesus, doesn’t it? Jesus was willing to hang around with anyone. He was willing to eat with anyone and to talk with anyone. But no matter what the situation, no matter who He was with, He was His Father’s son. That’s also what a healthy church looks like. I hope we are a community of wide and welcoming arms. No matter what they look like, no matter what they smell like, no matter what their politics, I hope that a stranger will feel welcome here. But once they are here, I hope they also meet a community of strong character; a community of Jesus Christ, His love, and His way.

That’s the first hospitality boundary, the boundary of character. The second hospitality boundary is the boundary of capacity. If you are judging by historical and theological thoroughness, Christine Pohl’s book on Hospitality, Making Room, is probably the gold standard. She reviews all the Bible texts and she looks at how the church has done hospitality throughout history. She’s obviously a person who’s really eager that the church should practice hospitality. But about two thirds of the way through the book she tells a story from her own experience. Years back, she joined a church that decided to make hospitality to outside neighbors the center of its identity. Her congregation welcomed hundreds of refugees and many local poor and homeless into the life of the church. They shared finances and resources and time and space. They attempted to respond to every person’s need. They gave and gave and gave. For a few years it was wonderful.

Unfortunately, after a few years of extreme hospitality that was only focused on outside needs and outside neighbors, the church essentially collapsed under the weight of its own ministry. Pastors burnt out. Members burnt out. People left. The ministry vanished. Here’s how Pohl herself diagnoses the problem: “Under the pressure of needs all around us, we were not careful to nourish our own lives, or to put guidelines in place that made sure workers had added rest and renewal.” In other words, they crossed the boundary of capacity.

A healthy Christian person practices hospitality, but a healthy Christian person can’t be all hospitality all the time. God is infinite in his capacities, but we are not. We need rest and refreshment. A healthy church practices hospitality, but a healthy church can’t be all hospitality all the time. Hospitality is an essential part of the church, but it’s not the only part of the church. We have other tasks. We have to take care of each other, share our joys and share our sorrows. We have to take time to teach our children and grow our own faith. We need time for Sabbath and rest. If we don’t drink deeply from the living water, we won’t have anything to share with our neighbors.

That's something you see in scripture too. In fact, very early in the early church you have a tension over hospitality burnout. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 and you get the sense that the workers in the Thessalonian church are burning out. They're tired of caring for and doing the work for a whole group of idle members. These idle members are taking advantage of the church's hospitality. They're eating the food and taking up shelter and contributing nothing. Paul is fed up. He says: "Such people should settle down and earn the food they eat." He tells the church keep away from such people. Paul's words show that hospitality has limits. Our hospitality is constrained by our capacities.

This is tricky of course. Human nature being what it is, it's easy for us to use the boundary of capacity as an excuse. We are tempted to draw the boundary of our capacity too small so that we can have more for ourselves. Calvin warned against this. He wrote this: "Let us beware that we seek not cover for our stinginess under the shadow of prudence." Good advice. Did you know that John Calvin was a big proponent of hospitality? During Calvin's time in Geneva there was an influx of Protestant refugees from other parts of Europe, especially France and England. Lots of refugees! In fact, in 1538-1539 the hospital in Geneva assisted 10,657 poor travelers who came through town. Not everyone in Geneva felt good about these strangers, but Calvin strongly supported their welcome and care. He thought it was a sacred duty to help these refugees and he based his beliefs on the fact that they were made in the image of God. Here's a quote: "If there come [to our door] some Moor or barbarian, since he is a man, he brings a mirror in which we are able to contemplate that he is our brother and our neighbor." We need to help these people! Calvin's commitment was based in his own experience. He had been a refugee, a stranger, a wanderer. In 1534 he fled France because of his religious beliefs. He went into a kind of exile, moving from place to place. It was a traumatic time. I read this week that during his exile Calvin wrote, "I wanted to die to be rid of my fears." Calvin knew the need and the power of hospitality. Drawing the boundary of capacity will always be a challenge. We will always be balancing the call to sacrificial generosity against the reality of our human limitations.

Let's finish this morning with a question about our passage. Was there anything hospitable about Jesus throwing the merchants and the moneychangers out of the temple courts? Yes, ironically, in a way this too is a hospitality story. Because when Jesus threw the merchants out, he was making room. Making room for the gentiles, making room for all the nations. Because the Father loved them too and wanted to bring them to himself. So the anger and intensity that causes Jesus to turn the tables in our passage, is the same passion that causes him to go to the cross. It's the same passion that causes him to give up his life for the world, and it has the same goal. On the cross Christ makes room. He tears the door to the Father's house wide open. The curtain of the temple is torn in two. And now all of us gentiles, all of us sinners, all of us doubters, all of us rebels, all of us merchants, all of us moneychangers, all of us beloved children, have room in the Father's house.

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