

Practicing Our Faith: Hospitality

*A sermon preached on Luke 14:7-24 on Sunday, October 4, 2026,
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I.

You've heard me tell stories before from Father Greg Boyle and the ministry he started decades ago in LA called Homeboy Industries, the largest gang-intervention, rehabilitation, and reentry program in the world. He tells a story about what happened one day at the Homegirl Cafe, where "women with records, young ladies from rival gangs, and waitresses with attitude will gladly take your order." Because it's Los Angeles, there's no telling who might be seated in the cafe for lunch on any given day. You might see the mayor, or Jim Carrey, or the whole roster of the LA Dodgers.

That day, Oscar-winning actress Diane Keaton had come in for lunch with a friend who was a regular. Glenda was their waitress, having found her way to Homegirl Cafe after a long stint in a California state prison now out for parole. She seems unfazed that a movie star is at her table, unfazed because she has no idea who Diane Keaton is. She rattles off the specials, takes their order, when all of a sudden, she stops. "Wait a minute," Glenda says, pointing at Diane. "I feel like I know you. Have we met before?" Sheepishly, Diane Keaton deflects with a rehearsed response, "Oh, I suppose I have one of those faces that people think they've seen before." But then Glenda shakes her head and lights up from head to toe: "no wait! Now I know! WE WERE LOCKED UP TOGETHER!!"

On this event, Father Greg said this: "it took my breath away when I heard it. And I don't believe we've had any further Diane Keaton sightings, now that I think of it. But suddenly... kinship so quickly. Oscar-winning

actress. Attitudinal waitress. Exactly what God had in mind.”¹ You never know what happens or who might show up when the table is set!

II.

Our journey through the practices of the faith has brought us today to the dinner table. In the Gospel of Luke, it seems that Jesus is always there: eating with someone, like the disciples, tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees, or feeding the crowds with ordinary ingredients like bread and fish. He told parables about people who were hungry, parables about figs and mustard seeds and yeast, parables about great banquets such as this one. Jesus’s hearers would know that culturally, the table was a significant place for social formation, where hierarchies of status would be reinforced and relationships solidified. Which makes it all the more significant that in Jesus’s descriptions of where to place oneself at the table and his story about a banquet whose guest list is disrupted, it seems the tables have turned.² (Pun very much intended.)

Jesus’s lessons for hosts and guests come in response to what he watched as, there in the Pharisee’s home, people arranged themselves around the table. “Take a low place at the table when you’re invited,” Jesus says to the guests. “Invite those who cannot repay you or return the favor,” he says to the hosts. Then he tells his tablemates a story: a guy puts on a banquet and invites many. But when time came for the dinner, the guests who’d RSVP’d now all had excuses for their absence: land to see, yokes to try out, a marriage to settle into. Such is the reality of the dinner party when plans change. But here, the parable takes a turn. When the host heard about

¹ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, p11-12.

² Thanks to the durable notes from Dr. Diane Lipsett’s New Testament Interpretation class in the fall of 2007 for this summary of table fellowship in the Gospel of Luke!

his guests, he angrily sends out his servant to go out and find not guests from the same social circle, but rather those society would deem unworthy – the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. And when there was still room at the table leftover, again the host directs his servant out to the roads and lanes to extend even wider the invitation to those who wouldn't expect it, passing strangers on the highways and byways, reluctant citizens who'd never imagine an invitation such as this, and to compel them to come in.

It's one of those stories that demands to be heard both up close and with the long view. For just as God's welcome is wide, so too should ours be as well. Just as God's table accommodates all, so too should ours be as well. Just as God's dream for this world specifically welcomes the overlooked and outcast, so too should our practices of faith in this world be as well. Because in God's economy, guests and hosts alike will receive gift and blessing.

III.

We've talked over the years about what the word "hospitality" gins up for us. You might think of the hospitality industry, and all the hotels and restaurants and bars and entertainment venues that form it. Or you might envision hospitality within a church context: the Hospitality Ministry Team and all the warmth they provide for our gatherings, or gatherings to promote table fellowship among folks who don't know each other all that well, like Summer Supper Clubs or what we'd hoped would happen tonight out on Fifth Street with fellow churches at our Longest Table gathering until the "all day rainy drizzle" set in! Maybe you think of tea parties or front porch visits. Maybe you think of shelters for those in need, or maybe if you're a language nerd like me, you think of all words with a shared root and practice like

hospitals, hospices, hostels, all created by Christians, all out of this commitment to hospitality.

But hospitality to Christians and churches is more than just providing a warm meal, or welcoming in someone new, as important as these practices are. Because extending hospitality in our welcome means putting our faith into action. Doing the word, not just hearing it. Loving our neighbors, and loving all of them. Treating anyone who comes in as if they might be Jesus himself. Widening the table, opening the door, welcoming the stranger.

Hospitality is so ordinary a practice, it almost seems obvious. If as Christians, we believe that all people bear the image of God, then our actions toward other humans must reflect that. But did you hear in our text that there's vulnerability on the part of the one extending hospitality AND the one receiving hospitality? South African theologian Allan Boesak wrote that "the pinnacle of lovelessness is not our unwillingness to be a neighbor to someone, but our unwillingness to allow them to be neighbor to us."³ It's a searing truth from theologian Arthur Sutherland, who says, "Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls."⁴ Hospitality becomes this essential practice, this ground zero for putting our faith into action. It's the space where Jesus shakes us out of our complacency, as we prayed earlier "from the center where faith is comfortable to the edges where faith is deepened." It fills our tables with beloveds, and leaves no one behind.

IV.

You may be listening today and thinking to yourself, "I hear you. I get it. Hospitality matters. I'd love to practice this more, but have you seen the state

³ Allan Boesak as quoted in Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, p120.

⁴ Arthur Sutherland, *A Christian Theology of Hospitality*, as quoted in *Interpretation*, April 2008.

of my house? I'd have to move all the papers and piles of folded clothes off the dining room table to host someone. I'd have to find a really good meal to cook (and I'm not really all that great in the kitchen!), or find a free night in a relatively free week so I don't wear out, or find the right people to make the guest list as welcoming as possible, or find more money because have you seen the price of groceries?! And what if I do it wrong and it doesn't ... well, *work*? What if it's awkward, what if I'm no fun, what if I get taken advantage of, what if I accidentally offend someone? I don't want to be a burden... and you know, honestly pastor, I really can't do this right now. It's just too much. I won't do this as well as others. Come back to me when the kids have grown, when my bank account is flush, when the house is fixed, when my schedule clears."

Sound familiar? Me too. I hear you. I get it. Hospitality can be hard. That's why we need practice. And might I suggest today that it starts with us not as host, but as guest.

In just a moment, we'll come together to God's table of love. It's God's table, you know – not ours to police. We are guest. Jesus is host. We don't choose the guest list, or the menu, or the table talk. We just receive the gift of welcome, honoring the many hands and labor who made possible the grain harvested and bread made, the grapes grown and juice formed, the table set and elements served. That's where we practice "guesting" at the table, vulnerable as it may be. Then when the time comes to be welcomed as a guest somewhere in your life, ask yourself: where *else* in my life might I be a guest? What invitation could I say yes to, even if it makes me a little scared? Who could I put myself among where I'd be the stranger, not the resident?

Then when the time comes to host, what if you began by simply noticing the strangers in your midst – the neighbor down the street who you’ve never met, or the teenager you always see at the grocery store, or the guy who stands at that stoplight with a sign every Saturday? Then start small – say, looking a passerby in the eye and offering greetings. Maybe you linger for a conversation – maybe at the store, or the gym, or the pickup line, on your street, maybe it’s right here after worship – where you practice genuine curiosity about the one you’re with. If welcoming someone into your home feels like a giant leap, what if you invited one of these folks you notice out for coffee or a snack? What if you told a handful of neighbors you didn’t know all that well that you’d be out on your porch on a Sunday afternoon if anyone wanted to drop by for hot apple cider and a chat? What if you found a community here in town with whom to practice hospitality, like spending a night at Samaritan Ministries or the Bethesda Center or sharing food and needs with the community of Una Bendicion?

These are but a handful of the many practices of hospitality, and might challenge you just a bit out of your comfort zone. That’s ok. As guest and host, I imagine what you’ll find is what Jesus has been saying all along: that all are transformed when hospitality is shared and love is made known.

V.

Let me tell you one final story from Homeboy Industries. Father Greg laments that in his work, he does a lot of funerals for folks he’d loved and served. One was for Chucky, his body reaching its end after prolonged drug use and long-tended wounds from gang violence. That day, the place was packed, everyone in their Packers jerseys (that was Chucky’s team). The crowd as Father Greg described: “gang members, drug addicts, and drug

dealers; women who had engaged in sex trafficking, and those who had engaged and traded them. People in recovery and people who presently were high. Felons and revived folks and those barely hanging on.”

When time came in the service for communion, Father Greg began as was his custom. “Pope Francis says that communion is not the grand prize for the perfect person, but food for the hungry one. And we’re all hungry.” He invited them up, and they did, and communion took forever. “I was struck at how moved to tears they were by Chucky’s death,” he remembered, “when a woman, taking communion in her hand, looked at me with tear-soaked eyes and said, “thank you for inviting us.”⁵

Friends, we are host and guest, stranger and friend, invited always by the One who calls us by name, and sent forth to practice as audacious a welcome as his. May it be so!

Amen!

⁵ Gregory Boyle, *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness*, p143-144.