

Ancient Christian Practices: Hospitality

Luke 15:1-32

Sunday, Mach 1, 1010

This is the fourth in a series of sermons on ancient Christian practices. We have looked at prayer, fasting, and keeping Sabbath. That hardly exhausts the list of practices that have kept “body and soul together” for Christians over two thousand years, but It’s a start. Besides, these practices take *practice!* Good ideas don’t become habits without using them! Take, for example, last Sunday’s topic: Sabbath keeping. We talked not only about taking holy time to be with God on Sunday, but also taking a **T – a Time Out** -- at critical times in our lives to ask God for help. Remember? About taking a **T** on blame, for example. How is blame working for you? How often does blame help any situation or relationship? To take a **T on** blame is to ask God for help seeing as God sees – with *God’s justice, God’s forgiveness, and God’s unconditional love.* I don’t know about you, but I’m still working on it!

Today I want to say a few things about the ancient practice of *hospitality*. It may seem odd to you that I have linked the practice of hospitality up with the story of the Prodigal Son. And yet, when is hospitality most in question unless it is when we are invited to exercise hospitality toward those who have hurt us or disappointed us? Remember that the story of the Prodigal Son is really the story of not one but two sons. The one Son blew off his inheritance and finally came limping home. His father forgives him and throws a party for him in an extravagant display of hospitality! But remember the other, the elder Son? He is *instructed* by his father to show some hospitality toward his wayward brother, but he cannot. Can you blame the elder brother, the one who stuck around and did the honorable thing? After all, the way we’ve been taught to look at things in the world,

it may appear that *justice is on his side!* Yet, the father loves both sons equally, the one who blew it and came to his senses, and the one who stuck around but cannot open his heart.

What a strange story! What a strange and wonderful God! Imagine a God who isn't paying out justice as we see justice, but instead is about forgiving the past and transforming stuck and broken relationships!

A fascinating idea has come up in our Race Matters conversation taking place after church these past few Sundays. In the book we have been using, called *Racing Across the Lines*, the author (Deborah Plummer) says that sometimes the Golden Rule isn't enough. Remember the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?* Some form of the Golden Rule exists in every religious tradition. But Deborah Plummer suggests that in the conflicted world of race relations in our country, maybe we need to go a step beyond the Golden Rule, to a *Platinum Rule*. The Platinum Rule invites us to treat others *the way they want to be treated*. The idea behind this is that we would get to know others so well that we know what hospitality looks like to them. You get to be in someone else's world as well as your own.

Let me give you an example. Those of you who have been here at South Church some years will remember the sad story of the death of Lucius Weathersby, who was our music director for a year or so before his untimely death from a stroke one night after choir practice. Lucius was black and from Louisiana, and in his later thirties. He literally got blown out of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. At the time of his death, and wanting to be hospitable, I made arrangements for Lucius' mother and step-father to come to Springfield for a memorial service. I picked

them up at the airport, went to the hospital with them, took them out to dinner and put them up at a hotel here in Springfield at the church's expense. It was a hard time for everybody – more so than I can ever fully explain to you. But one small part of the story is that Lucius' family, from a small African American community in Louisiana, was, in their own dignified way, mystified and offended by our church's treatment of them. I hosted them as I would have wanted to be treated – the Golden Rule. But in their tradition of hospitality, I learned later, hospitality means being taken into a home and being treated like family, with food and warmth and tears and intimate surroundings. So in their eyes we put them at a distance and leaving them to their own devices at a devastating time and in deeply unfamiliar surroundings. Was anybody right or wrong here? No, but it was a lost opportunity for relationship and healing. What could I have learned if I had asked? How could God have added a healing touch to Lucius' death in our community?

You see, God loves that family unconditionally and God loves me unconditionally! We are equally welcome in the kingdom! But working out that kingdom on earth is hugely challenging, especially when we have different expectations about how we ought to be treated!

I believe there is no more important invitation today than a Platinum Hospitality! And you and I here in this church are on the cutting edge of that hospitality – of fashioning a community that is diverse and beautiful because we invite, explore, understand and celebrate our differences. Or, to put it another way, to put out a welcome sign that does not say, *Come be like us*, but instead says, *Come, bring your gifts to us and let us make something new together!* That is Platinum Hospitality!

One of the lovely things deep in the tradition of this church is its hospitality. You have always been warm and you have always attempted to make the stranger welcome. I would describe this church as a Golden Rule church. We do our best to treat others as we would be treated. That is a beautiful thing. Yet, I believe that we are being called to take a step deeper into God's kingdom and become a Platinum Rule church. And that means discovering and celebrating the richness of the gifts of all who come here seeking a spiritual home.

The beauty of the story of the Prodigal Son is that both the elder and the younger sons are loved and celebrated by the father. The gifts of both are understood and received. Both are worthy in the eyes of the father. The younger son has a lot to learn about receiving a second chance. The older son has a lot to learn about giving a second chance. Because of the love of the father, they are both going to get a second chance.

The parallel to our lives is that we have a God who desires more than anything else that we become a family in which each member feels his or her worth and sees the worth and gifts of every other member. To build a healthy church family at this time and in this city takes enormous psychic stamina and willingness to work at relationship. First, you simply have to show up. This work has to be important to you. Nothing much of substance is going to happen to us unless we're willing to show up for God.

Then, you have to be open to God's gentle invitation that every person here this morning is truly worth something special not only in God's eyes, but in yours. You have to set fear and anger and perhaps some past hurts aside. And then you have to apply the Platinum Rule, accepting that all the children of God are equally challenged and equally loved.

Jesus' invitation to those listening to the story of the Prodigal Son that day long ago was gentle but firm. He said: You are loved – all of you. You are worthy – all of you. You belong together – all of you. You are forgiven – all of you. You are celebrated – all of you. Now come be part of my kingdom – all of you.

His invitation to us today hasn't changed. Come – all of us!

Amen