

Practice Hospitality

Intro:

- I was over at my neighbor's house playing music. Back in the day, I played in a band, and I don't play anymore, but we were just chilling in my neighbor's home studio, messing around on his guitars.
- We'd moved next door a few years before, and had been hosting dinners, and they had been over for multiple dinners ... but they had never once asked me what I did for a living.
- Now, this was in Portland, OR, where you can feel in the air an electric current of hostility to the gospel ...
- So when you're a new neighbor, you don't lead with, "I'm the pastor of a church."
- But finally, after *two* years of relationship, he said, "I've never asked: what do you do for a living." I said I was a pastor. His eyes *bulged*, and he blurted out, "But ... but you're so *nice*?"
- That is our cultural moment in a sentence.
- The world-renowned sociologist Philip Rief introduced the idea of the modern West as a "post-Christian culture."
- He categorized Western history into three phases:
 - Pre-Christian: think of Celtic Britain before St. Patrick's preaching of Jesus, or the Vikings before St. Boniface turned the Norse tribes to God.
 - This was a culture of tribal warfare and violence and child sacrifice; a spiritually charged world of gods and goddesses and evil spirits; animated by fear.
 - But the gospel transformed each of these cultures and the West entered a Christian phase:
 - (Now, it was never actually *Christian*; it was always a mix of Christian and pagan, and later secular norms, but ...) think of Medieval Italy or Victorian England

or Middle America in the 1950s.

- And there are still spotty remnants of Christian culture in parts of my country.
- But overall, we are now living in a *post-Christian* culture.
- And the *key* thing you need to understand about post-Christian culture is: it's not a return to pre-Christian culture (people aren't out sacrificing goats); it's a reaction *against* Christian culture: It's like the West's angst-y teenager moment, where we are railing against mom and dad, while still living under their roof and eating all their food.
- And while there are pockets of an emerging curiosity about Christian spirituality, which is really encouraging; overall, there is a rising hostility toward the gospel of Jesus; many of our neighbors and coworkers and family and friends aren't *neutral* on the good news about Jesus; many of them start with a deficit of suspicion and a bias *against* the faith.
- How do we bear witness to Jesus in a post-Christian culture?
- How do we share the good news of life in the kingdom of God when people are suspicious and skeptical of our very way of life?

Seam: Through the practice of witness.

Recap:

- Witness is the practice of intentionally opening up our lives in love and telling others the good news of Jesus through our words, our stories, and our way of life in community.
- And we are working through four *key aspects* of witness in our time.
- They are:
 - Begin with love
 - Practice hospitality
 - Partner with the Spirit
 - And share the good news
- Up on the docket for Session 02 is: practice hospitality.
- This is a practice that goes all the way back to Jesus himself, and has the potential to cut through the polarization of our culture and open people to God.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Luke 19 ...

Luke 19v1-10:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

- If you grew up in Sunday school, like I did, it’s easy to think of this as a cute story about a “wee little man.”
- But to the original audience, it was offensive.
- In verse seven, *all* the people — not some, *all* — murmur that Jesus “has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”
- Two reasons Jesus’ act of eating a meal at Zacchaeus’ home was offensive:

1. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which in that society, were social pariahs.

- He was Jewish, but he was getting rich by working for the Roman Empire, the oppressors.
- Not only were tax collectors traitors, but they were notoriously corrupt, because they could charge whatever fee they wanted *on top* of Rome’s set tax, which was already sky high, and then use the local Roman garrison as thugs to collect at the point of a sword.
- You can imagine how they were *hated*.
- In Jesus’ culture, the lowest rungs on the moral ladder were tax collectors and

prostitutes. And who does Jesus eat with? *Tax collectors and prostitutes.*

- Secondly:

2. Meals meant even more in that culture than they do in ours.

- In every culture, meals are what the British anthropologist Mary Douglas called “boundary markers.”
- They bring people together, but they also keep people apart.
- Think of the way restaurants were segregated before the civil rights movement.
- Even in our supposedly egalitarian culture, as a general rule, we eat with our friends and families, not strangers.
- This is true of all societies, but it was *especially* true of first century Israel.
- The German Lutheran theologian Joachim Jermias writes this:
 - “In the East, even today, to invite a person to a meal ... was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness. Sharing a table meant sharing life ... The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God.”
- Another theologian I read said, “Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate!” He ate with all the wrong people.
- For Jesus, meals weren't a boundary marker but a sign of God's great welcome; not a way to keep people *out*, but to invite people *in* — to his new community of love.

Seam: And I want you to notice the writer Luke's closing line, because it's his explanation of why Jesus was eating and drinking with Zacchaeus and his questionable friend group.

v10: “For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.”

- This line is a repeat from earlier in Luke's gospel.
- Keep in mind, this was written for an oral culture, and the original hearers' ears would immediately perk up here; wait, he already said that ...
- In chapter seven there's another story about Jesus eating a meal with a woman “... who lived a sinful life ...” (Luke 7v37) which is a gracious way of saying, was a sex-worker.
- And in that story, Jesus uses the same line: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking ...

(Luke 7v34)

Seam: Jesus's critics accuse him of being a glutton and a drunkard, and while I don't think he was; he got that reputation *somewhere*.

Jesus eating:

- These are just two of *many* stories of Jesus eating and drinking with people far from God ...
- In Luke alone there are over *fifty* references to Jesus and food!
- The Biblical scholar Robert Karris writes, "In Luke's gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."
- I *like* Jesus!

Two phrases:

- And the missiologist Tim Chester has this fascinating insight into Jesus' repeated turn of phrase:
 - "... the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19v10)
 - And "The Son of Man came eating and drinking." (Luke 7v34)
- One was about Jesus' mission: *what* he came to do. He came to seek and save the lost.
- The other was about Jesus' *method*: How he did it. He came *eating and drinking*.
- How did Jesus share the good news of the kingdom with people who were far from God?
- He invited them to the table. He gave thanks, and broke bread. He made space for conversation. He asked questions. He spoke, but he also lent a listening ear ... and he welcomed "tax collectors and sinners" into the new community of God, one meal at a time.

Hinge: Now, this kind of eating and drinking with people far from God is what the New Testament calls "hospitality."

Hospitality:

- The word "hospitality" is *philoxenian* in Greek. It's a compound word:
- *Philo* means love. Think of Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love."
- *Xenos* means stranger, or foreigner, or people who are "other."

- Hospitality is the exact opposite of *xenophobia*.
- Rather than the *fear* of people who are “other,” it’s the *love* of the stranger: the *welcome* of all as a guest.
- I would define it as expressing the welcome of God the Father to all through tangible acts of love, ideally through giving food, shelter, and relationship.
- The author Rosaria Butterfield as “turning strangers into neighbors and neighbors into family.”
- To clarify, hospitality is not the same thing as *entertainment*.
- When you read hospitality in the NT, don’t imagine a Pinterest-perfect dinner party with linen napkins, hanging lights, and farm-to-table food.
- This image is off-putting for many people: if *that’s* hospitality, how do you do that if you’re poor or in college or a lousy cook or don’t know your Bordeaux from your pinot?
- But Scripture would not command all followers of Jesus to do something they could not do, and we are *commanded* to continue Jesus’ practice of hospitality!
- Romans 12v13: “Practice hospitality.”
 - The word “practice” there is *diokontes*. One lexicon defines it as: “to do something with intense effort and with definite purpose or goal.”
 - It can be translated, “... *be eager to show* hospitality.” (NLT) or “... seek to show hospitality.” (ESV) or “pursuing hospitality.” (BLB)
- 1 Peter 4v8-10: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. [How?!] Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”
 - And that’s referring more to your fellow Christians, but look at ...
- Hebrews 13v1-2: “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”
 - Meaning: we are to practice hospitality both to our fellow Christians, and to the wider world.
- And we are *commanded* to carry on this practice from Jesus’ life.

- Now, our motivation should be love, not a guilt trip, but you get the point, this simple act of welcoming people to the table, is a radical expression of God's heart of love to *all*.

Seam: Rosaria Butterfield calls it “radically ordinary hospitality.”

Radically ordinary:

- She writes:
 - “Radically ordinary hospitality — those who live it see strangers as neighbors and neighbors as family of God. They recoil at reducing a person to a category or a label. They see God’s image reflected in the eyes of every human being on earth ... Those who live out radically ordinary hospitality see their homes not as theirs at all but as God’s gift to use for the furtherance of his kingdom. They open doors; they seek out the underprivileged. They know that the gospel comes with a house key.”¹
- This is a vital practice to reclaim in our post-Christian culture.
- I have preached the gospel from a stage to thousands upon thousands of people for many years.
- But all the best conversations I’ve ever had with people far from God have happened around my table, in my home.
- And I don’t know of a better context than the table to make people feel safe; to love, and serve, to meet practical needs, and heal emotional wounds; to preach the gospel in word *and* deed; to invite people into the community of love ...
- And it’s so *radically ordinary!*
- Simon Carey Holt, an Australian chef turned theologian, writes:
 - “It’s good to be reminded that the table is a very ordinary place, a place so routine and everyday that it’s easily overlooked as a place of ministry ... At its base, hospitality is about providing a space for God’s Spirit to move. Setting a table, cooking a meal, washing the dishes is the ministry of facilitation: providing a context in which people feel loved and welcome and where God’s Spirit can be at work in their lives. Hospitality is a very ordinary business, but in its ordinariness is its real worth ... whatever it looks like, your own table is a sacred place.”
- And the beauty of this practice is: this is something you’re *already* doing!
- You likely eat meals two or three times a *day*.

- You don't need to add anything into your already overbusy life; you just need to repurpose what you're *already* doing into an act of witness.
- Jesus said the greatest command in all of Scripture was to love God with all we are; *and he said the second is*, "Love your neighbor as yourself."
- And while we know from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, that our neighbor is *more* than just our literal neighbor; *it's not less!*
- In fact, the *first* meaning of "love your neighbor" is love your *neighbor-neighbor* — as in, the person you *live* by.
- I'm betting that your neighbors eat food. I'm betting they eat food around the same time you do every day. I'm betting many of them are lonely, or afraid, or living through a season of pain and suffering.
- Do you know your neighbors? Do you know their names? Their stories? Their spiritual journey? Where their heart hurts?
- Last week, your exercise was to go on a prayer walk in your neighborhood or an environment you frequent and ask God for his heart of compassion; this week, it's to translate compassion into an invitation to the table.
- This is as simple as walking across the street, or down the hallway; crossing that awkward little speed bump of neighborly small talk, and inviting your neighbor to share a meal ...
- Or the best place for you to start may be to invite a co-worker to join you at a food truck for lunch, or to get coffee with an old friend ... but ...
- What if you started to reimagine your home, not as a castle, as a place to watch TV or veg out, but as an outpost of the kingdom of God; as a haven for those in need of refuge — in need of love, of a listening ear, of protection or provision, of welcome into community?
- All you need is a table, and it doesn't even have to be yours ...

Notes

1. Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a Housekey*