

Sermon

September 25, 2016 | The 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 5:27-32 | Peter Lane

In Luke, Jesus was often an invited guest at meals. For example, today's reading. Levi invites Jesus to his home for a great banquet. Another example is at the very end of Luke, when the two disciples who had been with the hidden Jesus on the Road to Emmaus invite Jesus in for a meal. "Jesus, come in..." When Luke was writing his Gospel, he had the Gospel of Mark as a source. Luke used a lot of Mark's stories. One way we can see the importance to Luke of the idea of inviting Jesus in is how Luke took some of Mark's stories and added invitations to Jesus. In Mark 7 Pharisees see Jesus' disciples eating without washed hands and get perplexed. Luke changes the story slightly in his version so that a Pharisee first invites Jesus to dinner (Luke 11:37ff). In Luke, an invitation to Jesus inspires solidarity and leads to redemption and new life.

You might know that around here at SPR we like to speak about mirroring the radical hospitality practiced by Jesus. Sometimes we use the shorthand: "the radical hospitality of Jesus." I think we usually mean by that a possessive, "Jesus' radical hospitality." But what about that other sense of "of"? Where we use 'of' to mean the object of an action. Today I am interested in the hospitality shown to Jesus. Jesus as the invited guest.

I want to propose that if we are going to practice Jesus' radical hospitality, our focus can not only be on the strangers we typically encounter. The first strange to be invited is Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, that meant inviting the person Jesus. In our world and in the history of the Church, that means inviting Jesus in the form of the scriptures. When Jesus is invited in something changes. There is often a scandal, solidarity is inspired, and there is new life. Beloved community arises. Let's look at that pattern in four examples.

First, our text. Jesus says, "Follow me." Levi responds to Jesus and invites Jesus in for a big dinner. Once welcomed, Jesus provokes scandal. The scribes and the pharisees say to Jesus' disciples, "Wait a second, John's disciples are pious, you are bunch of drinkers." In the ancient world, "it was axiomatic ... that table fellowship like hospitality, symbolized spiritual

unity" (Johnson, 99). And in Roman Palestine the tax collectors were not viewed to be in spiritual unity with the pious. They were contractors. Rome gave them a certain amount to collect, say \$5,000. Anything they collected above that was theirs to keep. You can see why these tax collectors were quite reviled and were certainly not in the religious center. Jesus causes scandal by blurring the lines, by not separating the sick and the well and by confusing who is sick and who is well. This Jesus puts inclusion above piety. And the inclusion is different from our 21st Century inclusion, Jesus' inclusion comes with a call to repentance, for all involved, inspiring solidarity. What comes of this scandal? Is there new life? Our story seems to end right there. But by the end of Jesus' ministry, in Luke 19, another Tax Collector (Zacchaeus this time) is happy to invite Jesus in to his home, promises to give 50% of his possessions to the poor and to repay 4x to anyone he has defrauded. Levi could have ignored Jesus invitation to "follow me." Instead Levi provided hospitality to Jesus. Inclusion and repentance and justice result.

Our second example comes from Dostoevsky. Parishioner June Farris shared a terrific article with me about a central scene in *Crime and Punishment*. Thanks June. Let me try and quickly get you up to speed. In *Crime and Punishment* the main character Raskolnikov kills an old lady because he can. Unable to deal with his action, Raskolnikov declines deeper and deeper into a confused stupor. Four days later, still not discovered, Raskolnikov is at rock bottom. A young prostitute welcomes him into her dingy room. Not for business, but for conversation. Eventually Sonya invites Jesus in by reading out loud the Lazarus story from the Gospel of John. When the reading ends, the prostitute and the murderer sit in silence for five minutes. Raskolnikov breaks the silence saying things will change. He begins his move towards repentance. And they begin their move toward each other. It is not the well that have need of a doctor, but the sick. In her fascinating article, Valentina Izmirlieva points out how foolish Sonya's hospitality seemed, welcoming a murderer into the dingy rented room, so downtrodden that it did not even have curtains. Izmirlieva

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interprets this scene "as the site of radical Christian hospitality" because Sonya provides the ultimate two-fold hospitality—to Raskolnikov yes but also to Jesus in the form of the scriptures. Sonya invited the "scripture into a place where Scripture is a stranger, into a life that has denied it" (Izmirlieva, 282). The novel goes on for hundreds of pages after this scene, but the inviting of Jesus in, in the form of the scriptures, changes the trajectory. Sonya convinces Raskolnikov to confess and then follows him to Siberia where he has been sentenced. Her love helps rehabilitate him and his her. There is repentance and new life. And Sonya and Raskolnikov are bound together.

A third example comes from the story of Ruby Bridges. Ruby Bridges was the 6-year-old girl who integrated the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960. Robert Coles, the wonderful child psychiatrist from New Orleans met with Ruby during those months. He was deeply impressed by Ruby's fortitude. Coles relates how he noticed that Ruby would stop while walking through the crowds of white protestors and talk. When asked, Ruby explained that she was not talking to the protestors but praying for them. Coles asked what she said. "I always say the same thing. Please, dear God, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." How did Ruby have that fortitude? Ruby's parents had invited Jesus in. They were illiterate, but they had memorized important parts of the Gospel of Luke and had said them enough around the house that they were implanted in Ruby's mind. That phrase, forgive them for they know not what they are doing, appears only in Luke. Ruby's parents provided amazing hospitality to Jesus by memorizing the scriptures. In a moment of scandal, where inclusion trumped piety, that hospitality to Jesus created amazing power for a young girl. Coles says, Ruby's parents "taught her biblical truths in a way that she was to live them out." Thank God for the Bridges family and their hospitality to Jesus and the part it played in bringing greater justice to our country.

Finally, how about here at SPR? Valentina Izmirlieva, the author of the fascinating article about Dostoevsky and radical hospitality, writes about how the Eastern Orthodox take their

liturgical responsibility to welcoming Jesus in the form of the scriptures very seriously. In the Eastern church they "focus less on the social aspect of hospitality than on its sacramental significance." They work hard to make a space for Jesus in the scriptures and in the Eucharist. They invite Jesus in. It is at moments like this that I miss the old response to the readings, "The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God." It was more clear that Jesus, the Word, could be present in these Holy Scriptures. The Orthodox can be our inspiration. Our radical hospitality can be a double hospitality. The first stranger to invite in is Jesus. Doing so will transform us to invite in many more strangers. Inviting Jesus in will also confuse who is sick and who is well, turning hospitality into solidarity. Let's invite Jesus in. I have no doubt it will be accompanied by scandal. And I have even less doubt that that it will lead to redemption and new life.

AMEN.

Sources:

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Interview of Robert Coles about Ruby Bridges <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPK3zQM2dHU>.