

## *Who Is Hosting Your Party?*

Exodus 32: 1-14      Luke 14: 12-24

Christianity in its earliest days was known for its hospitality, before Constantine and the establishment of the church as a state religion. A lot of that priority of hospitality was lost then as the church became preoccupied with a new set of priorities. That emphasis on hospitality remains a priority among people of the Middle East from which our faith tradition emerged.

There is a story of a man in the Middle East who owned a prized horse. A rich man was obsessed with purchasing this horse, but every time he made an offer, the owner would refuse. Tough times came upon the land and the owner of the horse fell upon dire times. The rich man figured that now would be the perfect time to make an offer which would gain him the horse he always wanted, and save his friend from financial ruin. They arranged to meet at owner's home where they had a meal together as was the expected custom, the offering of good hospitality to a visitor. After the meal as they had coffee, the rich man made a generous offer to buy the horse. The owner looked away sadly and said that he was sorry. He couldn't sell the horse to the rich man. In order to fulfill the expectations of being a good host, the horse was needed to provide the meal. The rich man understood completely that the obligations of a host in providing hospitality to a guest took priority over every other consideration.

You understand the importance of hospitality and being a good host. You have the everyday plates and cups and glasses and silverware, and then you have the settings for special occasions tucked away in a cupboard or a closet or a pantry. This may include heirloom items. Somehow we ended up with my grandmother's fine silverware, probably because my sister was living on boat at the time with her husband and a small rather nasty dog by reputation. You have to hand-wash each piece – what a pain!

When the occasion of hospitality comes to your home, you're likely to pull out those fineries and make your best show possible. It isn't simply about showmanship, although there is some of that, but it is about honoring the guest by providing an optimal setting that shows how much you value them and appreciate their company in your home.

If you have really important company at home, you don't often want to be trying out some risky new recipe. You try stuff out on your family and friends and enemies, not on your valued guests.

The point is that we know the importance of being a good host.

We also know how the gossip magazines can be, talking about particular parties hosted by special people. Some of the events are places where it is privilege to attend, a place where one must be seen, a don't-miss occasion. These hosts have developed a prominent reputation, providing an occasion where the right connections can be made and important people can become acquainted. An invitation to attend a dinner at the

White House? Who cares who is president; you better seize the moment and go! Watch a hockey game from a corporate box? You'll learn to love hockey – just go! One of my wellness instructors had the opportunity join the tour as a stage helper with the Dave Mathews Band last summer. She is a big fan, and goes whenever she can, but what an opportunity!

It isn't often that such opportunities come up for us; for many of us, it never happens. But we are hosted in our lives by a generous and gracious God, but that's something we may take for granted.

We might expect better from the Israelites by now, and certainly God expected better, but once again the people in the wilderness prove to be ungrateful and truculent as we rejoin the Exodus story.

Moses had been summoned by God to the top of Mount Sinai so that Moses could receive the laws and commands in how this people would now live, seeking to be righteous and faithful, coming into the Promised Land where they would encounter all kinds of distractions from such faithfulness to God. They needed rules, a code of laws to govern their community and their religious life. This was a tall order, so Moses was gone for quite a while. He left his brother Aaron in charge. Thanks to this event, we have some memory of Aaron after all, except that it isn't a good one.

Aaron was probably the wrong choice for this role because once the people approached him and asked him to take charge, he didn't exactly say, "No, no, we must wait for Moses and wait upon the Lord our God." In fact, the people asked for new gods. 'This God Yahweh who brought us out of Egypt seems to be done with us, so we need gods who will go before us and lead us.'

Moses had been away from the people for forty days and forty nights. The absence of Moses also meant the absence of God who had provided for them whenever they were in need. No Moses, no God, no more.

Aaron proves himself to be a real weenie; this is his big moment and he blows it. He asks for their jewelry, much of which we can assume was booty carried out from Egypt. Aaron makes a crude calf, shaping it in a mold and finishing it with a tool. When he's finished, he declares, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Notice how Aaron is re-writing their history by writing out the now-disfavored Yahweh and writing in the god of their own creation as their deliverer from Egypt.

The next day, the celebration begins at the altar to the golden calf, modestly enough with offerings in worship, followed by a pot luck, and then they went nuts – the party began. The people had felt as if the host had walked away from the party. They decided to set up a life-sized blow-up doll as a substitute host, paid it some mocking deference, and then trashed the whole place and partied like there was no tomorrow.

They were making such a commotion that God heard their revelry all the way on Mt. Sinai. God tells Moses that he better get back to his people. God recounts to Moses

all of what the Israelites have done. Judging from God's comments, it's a safe bet that God has had it with these people. They're a stiff-necked, stubborn bunch, and God just wants some running room to stoke up his anger and blast them to bits. They have been eating and drinking from God's hand – the true host, and are still eating and drinking from God's hand but now have the audacity to claim they've got another host?

Before God can act on his justified anger, Moses pleads with God to think about how this is going to look to the neighbors. Moses is pleading with God for these same people, yes, the useless ones who have just caused a tremendous mess for themselves. Moses reminds God how it would look if he had brought the Israelites out of Egypt only to kill them in the desert. It wouldn't help his reputation at all to give evidence of being homicidal or genocidal. Moses recalls the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and God softens up when he recalls these patriarchs who became so dear to the heart of God. God relents, for now.

We could say a lot more about that last item – *the Lord relented*. It means that Moses changed God's mind. That's quite something.

Let's move on to the Luke passage when Jesus is guest at the home of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath. (Matthew's version is such a mess from his editing that we're working with the Luke passage which seems more likely to have been closer to the original – Matthew 22:1-14) An occasion for healing on this Sabbath presents itself to Jesus who likely shocked his host and fellow Pharisee guests by proceeding to heal the man. This completely violates the prohibition on labor on the Sabbath.

It then becomes an occasion for preaching on humility. We had Jesus' closing remarks to the host, that in the future, rather than inviting the prominent and well-heeled, the fat and happy Pharisees, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and then you will be blessed.

Invite the outcasts. They cannot repay you – a key point. They will consider it an act of loving grace, not a matter of social obligation reciprocity. This would be a huge problem for many Pharisees who are attending to laws about ritual cleanliness. All of these people Jesus notes would violate ritual purity and, in their minds, cause them break their commitment to God. Unspoken by Jesus but very much in sight, the act of loving grace toward those in need will give you some appreciation for how God acts toward **you**, with loving grace in your sinfulness, knowing you cannot repay God.

One of the guests calls out, *Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God*. Jesus decides to tell a parable about a man preparing a great banquet.

The host had earlier invited many guests, presumably the well-off and the well-known, people who could appreciate a really fine dining experience. These would be people who knew which fork to use and which glass to drink from, and who swished the wine and didn't simply gulp it. You would want evidence that they had been to your house, and you'd tell your friends that these were the people who attended your banquet. The right kind of people. Good people.

When the preparations were complete, he sent his servant out to tell the guests to come, but they all made lame excuses. “Oh please excuse me, I just bought a field and I have to watch the wheat grow.” “Oh, I just bought several teams of oxen and I want to test drive them.” And “Oh, I just got married and well, y’know.” The excuse makers in the parable are metaphorically the Jews who have decided for one reason or another not to accept the messiah-ship of Jesus and have decided not to attend what the host has offered them, even after having accepted the invitation as special guests of the host who is, of course, God.

Well, the host was steamed when he got the servant’s report. “Go out and invite the poor, the weak, the blind, the sick – the outcasts.” If those who had been invited won’t attend, then the host – God – invites those who are of special concern to God, the ones with priority in the kingdom, the last who are becoming the first, the least who are becoming the greatest.

Still there is room at the banquet for more. He sends the servant out into the roadways to compel others to come in and fill the hall. Like the Gentiles who believe in Jesus, those who had not even known there was a banquet, they will be brought in and blessed at the table of God, the host. They shall taste the loving grace of their God. They shall feast on salvation.

The host for our lives, the host of our blessings, is our loving God, something we should not forget or corrupt or neglect. We need to know the host of our party. Otherwise we flirt with idols of our own creation, empty creations that favor our vanity and justify our sinfulness. In both stories, a false understanding of faithfulness corrupts the blessing of God and disdains the true host.

But in the parable, Jesus teaches that God also expects us to be hosts for those of special concern to our God. May we be mindful of God’s desire that we should set a banquet table for those who will cherish what is offered, sharing the view of our God that the poor, the weak, the blind, the sick – the outcasts are the ones who need our attention the most. Then we can honor our host who deserves our praise and our thanksgiving.