

“A Surprising Day”
Matthew 25:31-46
November 15, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

We’re continuing today in our study of our third core value, to be a welcoming community. The Bible often uses the word hospitality to describe the welcome we are to give to others, especially strangers and outsiders. One of the themes commonly associated with hospitality in the Bible is the idea of surprise. When Abraham and Sarah extended hospitality to their three visitors, they were surprised to learn later that they were entertaining three angels, one of whom was *the* angel of the Lord, an Old Testament reference to the Son of God. Today’s passage also speaks of hospitality and the surprise associated with it. The righteous express surprise that they should be credited with welcoming, feeding and clothing Jesus. The unrighteous are surprised that they are found guilty of not doing so. But one of the biggest surprises is the fact that the most defining day for our eternity, whether we spend eternity in God’s joyful kingdom or in eternal torment, should be determined by such a little thing as extending hospitality.

Notice the greatness of this day. It is a great setting, because it is the day when Jesus returns to the earth. Heaven is emptied of all its angels, because we are told that Jesus comes with **“all the angels”** (v. 31). Jesus is seated on a throne, and it is a throne of judgment. Before him, we read, **“will be gathered all the nations”** (v. 32). We learn from the rest of the Bible that this refers to all who have ever lived on the earth. Both the dead in Christ and those who have died without Christ will be present. This is the day referred to in the Apostle’s Creed when it says that “Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead.” The living are those who are alive at the return of Christ and the dead those who have died prior to his return. So Pontius Pilate, who judged Jesus and condemned him to death by crucifixion, will be there, finding the roles reversed. Adolph Hitler will be there. Every despotic dictator will be there, and you and I will be there. And for the first time in the history of the world, there will be religious agreement on one thing. Everyone will have the same creed, and it will be: **“Jesus Christ is Lord”** (Phil. 2:11). We will confess this with great joy, while Jesus’ defeated enemies will confess it with hatred and anger still in their hearts.

Notice the greatness of the matters to be determined on this day. Eternal destinies will be decided by Jesus as he separates all those gathered before him into two groups. Those on his right will be welcomed into everlasting joy in the kingdom prepared for them. And those on Jesus’ left will be sent into eternal punishment. Jesus didn’t teach universalism, in which all will eventually be saved, nor annihilationism, in which the lost at some point just cease to exist.

He warned instead of eternal torment in the place of separation from him. And all of this is decided by the seemingly little matter of hospitality, of giving a welcome to the least of Jesus' brothers. Let's look more carefully at what he teaches here.

I. The Importance of Hospitality

How could it be that such a momentous matter as spending eternity in either torment or happiness should be determined by something as seemingly small as one's practice of hospitality? Let me begin to answer that question by answering another. Does Jesus' teaching in this passage contradict the many other places in the Bible where it is clearly taught that our salvation is by grace instead of works? Does Jesus mean to teach here that salvation can be earned through the good work of hospitality? Notice two phrases of verse 34 that lead us to conclude that this passage does not teach salvation by works. **"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."** Notice that those who enjoy eternal happiness are called "blessed," and blessings are not earned but given. Notice too that their blessing is called an inheritance, and no one earns an inheritance.

If this doesn't teach salvation by works, what does it teach? It teaches that even though hospitality doesn't earn our salvation, it does reliably reveal the existence of our salvation. As has often been said, "Salvation is by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone." In other words, the inevitable fruit of trusting God alone for our salvation is a heart of love. That's what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 13 when he said that without love we are nothing more than a noisy, irritating clanging. The practice of hospitality was present in ancient times outside God's people. The difference though, in the words of Christine Pohl in her excellent book on hospitality, is that "The distinctive quality of Christian hospitality is that it offers a generous welcome to the 'least,' without concern for advantage or benefit to the host" (*Making Room*, p. 16). That's what we see in this passage.

Consider an illustration. Suppose a wealthy woman has only one heir, her 22-year old nephew, and she is not sure that she should leave all her estate to him. He is always very nice to her, but she wonders if he is being nice to her simply to get her money. She devises a test to find out. Late one afternoon, she dresses in old rags and disguises herself as a poor old woman. She then goes to her nephew's house, knocks on the door, and asks for his help. To her great sadness and dismay, he treats her rudely and slams the door in her face. When she persists, he calls the police and has her forcibly removed. If he had acted differently and shown kindness to this woman who seemingly could give nothing back to him, such kindness would not have earned the inheritance,

but it would have shown whether or not there was any heart of love inside him. Like that woman, Jesus says that he comes to us in the form of the poor, and says that the way we treat the powerless among us reveals more about us than anything else.

II. The Origin of Hospitality

Where do we get this kind of love, the kind that welcomes the least without regard for personal gain? To help answer that question, let's take another look at the Judgment Day described here. In particular, we need to consider what will happen regarding the sins of believers in Christ on this day. Will the sins of believers be mentioned or, since they are covered by the blood of Christ, will they never come up at all? Consider this verse from earlier in Matthew's Gospel. **"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"** (12:36-37). We have all spoken careless words that we would be ashamed to have revealed. I don't know how to understand this verse if it doesn't teach that they will be revealed, even those of believers in Christ. But there is a crucial difference regarding the sins of believers and those of unbelievers. The sins of believers in Christ will be revealed as forgiven sins.

Suppose you develop some disease that puts you in the hospital for several months, and you accumulate several hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical bills. Your insurance refuses to pay and you are liable for every single charge. As you look over the itemized bill, your heart sinks as you realize it will take you the rest of your life to pay off this debt, affecting your family's financial health for decades to come. Now let's change the scenario slightly. You still get sick and accumulate massive bills that your health insurance doesn't pay. But in this scenario a generous benefactor steps forward and pays every last bill for you. Now as you look over the itemized bill, instead of your heart sinking at each charge, your heart is filled with joy at the revelation of each one. That's the way it will be on Judgment Day for all who are in Christ. Our sins will be revealed, each one in exhaustive detail. But our great comfort and joy will be that Jesus has paid the debt for each one, so that the revelation of each sin will increase our joy in Jesus.

The kind of love that leads to hospitality comes when this truth of forgiven sins becomes real to us today. There is a difference between believing in sins forgiven at a theoretical level and believing it at a deeper heart level. A few months ago I had a bike accident. I had always believed at a theoretical level that bicycle helmets were good things that should always be worn when cycling. But when my head snapped and banged forcefully into the pavement on that day, my belief in helmets became much more than theoretical and

passed into deep gratitude of the heart. The same is true in this area of believing in the forgiveness of sins. On this day of judgment when our sins are revealed as sins forgiven, there will be great joy and gratitude. But we don't need to wait for that day to have this joy and gratitude. We can have it today, and it is when we do that love is borne in our hearts, the kind of love that gives hospitality to the least.

Love in our hearts is increased all the more when we consider the one who has made it all possible and what he had to endure in order for us to have this forgiveness. Our Lord Jesus, the same one who is on the throne of judgment in our passage, became poor and vulnerable that we might be rich and secure. He experienced life as a homeless infant and a child refugee when his parents were forced to flee to Egypt in order to save their child from the jealous wrath of King Herod. Then as an adult, Jesus said that he had no place to lay his head, after which he died as a despised convict. He experienced all this not because he was a sinner, but because we are, and he died as our substitute out of love for us. He welcomes us into his kingdom and into the fellowship of the Trinity, and asks us in return to welcome him as he comes to us in the form of the least of his brothers. That brings us to our next point.

III. The Privilege of Hospitality

Hospitality is a privilege because it brings us near to Jesus, allowing us to experience the joy of his presence. Jesus so identifies with the least of his brothers, with Christians, that to welcome and serve them is like welcoming and serving Jesus. We saw this theme in last week's sermon, when I pointed out that showing hospitality brings reward to the host in almost every example of hospitality in the Bible. We have the same thing again here, and the reward couldn't be greater. We get to experience nearness with Jesus.

The enjoyment of this privilege requires faith in at least two ways. First, we must believe that doing it to the least of Jesus' followers is like doing it to Jesus. Philip Yancey tells about a lunch he once had with Henri Nouwen in a Roman Catholic community known as Daybreak, in Toronto. Daybreak is devoted to caring for the seriously disabled, and Nouwen lived there to care for a 26-year old profoundly retarded young man named Adam.

Later Nouwen told me it took him nearly two hours to prepare Adam each day. Bathing and shaving him, brushing his teeth, combing his hair, guiding his hand as he tried to eat breakfast—these simple, repetitive acts had become for him almost like an hour of meditation.

I must admit I had a fleeting doubt as to whether this was the best use of the busy priest's time. Could not someone else take over the manual chores? When I cautiously broached the subject with Nouwen himself, he informed me that I had completely misinterpreted him. "I am not giving up anything," he insisted. "It is *I*,

not Adam, who gets the main benefit from our friendship.”

All day Nouwen kept circling back to my question, bringing up various ways he had benefited from his relationship with Adam. It had been difficult for him at first, he said. Physical touch, affection, and the messiness of caring for an uncoordinated person did not come easily. But he had learned to love Adam, truly to love him. In the process he had learned what it must be like for God to love us—spiritually uncoordinated, retarded, able to respond with what must seem to God like inarticulate grunts and groans (*Christianity Today*, December 9, 1996, p. 80).

A second thing we must believe if we are to enjoy the privileges of hospitality is that it is God himself who will lead us to those we are to serve. Note the importance of the word “see” in our text. The righteous respond to Jesus and say, **“When did we see you a stranger and welcome you?”** Since we cannot extend hospitality to everyone, how do we decide to whom we should limit our efforts? We trust that God will lead to us and help us to see those he wants us to serve. Edith Schaeffer, along with her husband, built a great ministry centered on hospitality. She wrote of our limitations by remarking, “because there are more people than we have time or strength to see personally and care for, it is imperative to remember that it is not sinful to be finite and limited.” So we limit ourselves to those God calls us to serve, and they are often the ones closest to us.

God may be calling you to go to a distant part of the world or our city to seek out those who need your love and welcome. Or it may be that he wants you to do so with those who you see all the time. Let me ask you to consider a very simple thing. Prepare a little extra food for your Sunday lunch, and then pray that God would lead you to someone at church who needs your love and welcome. It could be someone who has plenty of friends but just needs your welcome that day. Invite that person or family to lunch that day.

CONCLUSION:

I like what Christine Pohl says about hospitality. “As the biblical texts on hospitality are lived out, and as the Scriptures illumine and interpret present practices, Christians find their lives infused with the presence of Christ. Hospitality becomes for the Christian community a way of being the sacrament of God’s love in the world,... While we might imagine sacrifice [Rom. 12:1] in terms of one moment of heroic martyrdom, faithful hospitality usually involves laying our lives down in little pieces, in small acts of sacrificial love and service. Part of the mystery is that while such concrete acts of love are costly, they nourish and heal both giver and recipient” (p. 34). We welcome others sacrificially because Jesus has welcomed us in that way.