

God's Extravagant Welcome

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

3. *Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus's name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples;*

4. *Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to):*

*believers and agnostics,
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
women and men,
those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
those of all races and cultures,
those of all classes and abilities,
those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.*

—from “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity”

Reading: Luke 14:15-24

About 13 years ago I wrote an overture for the Presbyterian Church. The overture was adopted by the session (church board) of my congregation I was serving in Minnesota and passed up to the Presbytery of the Twin Cities area. The presbytery voted for it and passed it up to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It became known as the Open Communion Overture, and it simply asked the Presbyterian Church to bar no one from receiving communion. Sounds pretty reasonable, right? Well, let me give you some context.

I can remember the days when communion was allowed only for adult church members. Maybe some of you can, too. Children weren't allowed to receive the Lord's Supper until they had gone through confirmation, made adult profession of faith, and joined the church.

Now, later on that changed, and younger children were eventually allowed to share the Lord's Supper with the rest of the church family with the guidance of a parent or another responsible adult, *but only if they had been baptized*. And adults who had never made profession of faith also could receive communion *but only if they had been baptized*.

So some of us asked ourselves, “What would Jesus say about this?” And we decided that since he reflected God's radical, extravagant welcome of all people,

this same welcome should be reflected in our invitation to the Table. We suggested that we simply invite everyone, all persons to God's Table. For it is at the Table that speaks to us and opens up a view to a new world, a sacred realm with no distinctions, hierarchies or differences. It says in Luke (24:35) that Jesus was "*made known* to them in the breaking of the bread." How could we deny anyone this opportunity of grace that could lead to faith?

Others, such as John Wesley, admitted all "earnest seekers" to the Table. The only requirement was a hunger for God. Believers and doubters, the baptized and unbaptized, we thought that the only requirement of those present should be open to God.

Well, our overture was referred to the Office of Theology and Worship. And after four years (!) it came back to the General Assembly. Their decision then was to appoint a Study Group. Four more years later (!), they issued a 70 page report that essentially recommended no change to the policy.

In this morning's passage from the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Great Supper or the Heavenly Banquet: A man gave a great banquet and invited many people, but they all made excuses that they couldn't come. So the man told his servants to go out and bring back *the poor, the blind and the lame*. These were people normally overlooked and excluded from any ordinary feast, the typical outcasts. And the essence of the parable is this affirmation that everyone is invited to the table of God; nobody is excluded.

Being part of the Heavenly Banquet is unlike any other support. All are invited. It is not a privilege conferred upon the worthy. It is not even dependent upon if someone's heart is in the right place. In Matthew's version of the same story, it says that the servants went out and gathered everyone they could find off the streets, *both the good and the bad*. And Jesus demonstrated God's love for all people, regardless of their attitude toward God.

Jesus not only taught this, but Jesus practiced an open table, as well. And he got into trouble for his peculiar "table manners." The religious leaders were scandalized. They said Jesus was "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." In other words, Jesus did not make the appropriate distinctions and discriminations. He was cavorting and eating with the *wrong kind of people*. "Tax collectors" and "sinners" were code; they represented people with who one should not associate.

But why should the religious leaders be so upset by Jesus' table manners? Because the rules of eating serve as a microcosm for the rules of association and socialization. The table is a miniature mirror of society. According to John Dominic Crossan, Jesus' parable was a challenge to the social order of the day. It was advocating a revolutionary change in the way people related and was therefore a radical threat. Crossan said,

Think, for a moment, if beggars came to your door, of the difference between giving them some food to go, of inviting them into your kitchen for a meal, of bringing them into the dining room to eat in the evening with your family, or of having them come back on Saturday night for supper with a groups of your friends.

Peter Farb and George Armelagos said in their book on the anthropology of eating:

Once the anthropologist finds out where, when, and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members.

And so Jesus' table manners open a window to a world without barriers and distinctions, a world of radical equality. And this naturally threatened people.

At both the Last Supper story (Luke 22:19) and the Emmaus meal story (Luke 24:30), it says that Jesus *took, blessed, broke* and *gave* the bread. (four verbs) Now, when Jesus *took* and *blessed* the bread, he acted as the host or the *master* of the house. Jesus also acted as the *servant* of the house when he *broke* and *gave* the bread. Preparing and serving the food was done by servants or females. So not only was there equal sharing, but there was *equality of rank* and no hierarchy, no vertical distinctions.

And so by both his teaching and his actions, Jesus' table manners give us a view of a new order without distinction, without hierarchies. Jesus' table reflects the fact that he identified especially with the "least of these" in the world: the hungry, the poor, the forgotten, the criminals, the homeless. Jesus opens his table to all people; not even Judas was turned away.

Also, for Jesus eating was an affirmation of life, an act of celebration. In contrast to the ascetic tradition of John the Baptist, Jesus ate with joy! People asked him, "Why do you and your disciples not fast?" And as I said, they thought him to be "a glutton and a drunkard." There's even a story of Jesus supplying a wedding at Cana with gallons of wine!

New Testament scholar, Robert Jewett, writes:

Jesus' strategy was simple but profound: celebrate God's presence now... and evil will be transformed by the celebration itself.

For example,

Rather than denouncing Zacchaeus... Jesus invited himself into the rich man's house for the messianic banquet. The crowd "murmured" at the outrageous acceptance of a sinner who was betraying his country by collaborating with the Romans... But Jesus' strategy effected a voluntary

transformation on the part of Zacchaeus that all the physical force in the world could not achieve.

Only long after Jesus had died did the church formalize his meal into a solemn liturgy. And I can't help but feel that we've lost much of that celebratory character. For the communion meal celebrates the reality of the reign of God, where all are drawn together within God's unconditional love. Jesus' meal was a reflection of what the prophet talked about: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will prepare a feast for all people." (Isaiah 25:6)

Point three of the "Eight Points of Progressive Christianity" says that as progressives we

Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples.

The meal, the sacrament reflects God's radical, extravagant welcome that we hope to communicate and make as plain as possible to others. This welcome of God is not just lip service; it's not merely being polite. It's a *real* invitation. And so we open not just the Table but equal status in the whole life of the community. Now, we certainly don't always live up to this, but it's a wonderful aspiration embodied by the fourth point of progressive Christianity:

[We] invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to):

*believers and agnostics,
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
women and men,
those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
those of all races and cultures,
those of all classes and abilities,
those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.*

Part of how this church has lived into this extravagant welcome was to become an Open and Affirming church about 13 years ago. Unlike some denominations who might say gay and lesbian folks are welcome but then say, "If you're married or partnered, or sexually active or unrepentant of your sexual desires then you must be quiet or risk church discipline. Shhh!" No, have chosen a welcome that is open, honest and with no strings attached.

Now as a straight, White male I've enjoyed special privilege all of my life when I could always assume that I was welcome. My demographic group has held almost universal access for most of human civilization. But gay and lesbian people cannot assume they are really welcome, so part of signing up as Open and Affirming means that we *offer an explicit welcome, a special and public mention* because this is a group that is still excluded and scapegoated by so many—including our own legal system.

Jesus, the one “despised and rejected,” embodied God’s radical and equal inclusion of all. And every generation must learn what it means to follow Jesus’ extravagant welcome—to include those who are excluded in that generation—breaking down the dividing walls of hostility, of slavery, of class, or racism, of sexism, of heterosexism... and we’re not done yet.

As we celebrate the vision of the Heavenly Banquet, the Great Supper of Jesus,
may our eyes be opened
to God’s unqualified love and acceptance
for all people.