

“Best Seats”

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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

[Jesus said,]

*¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place,
so that when your host comes he may say to you,
‘Friend, go up higher’;
then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.*

¹¹ For every one who exalts himself will be humbled,

Luke 14:10-11^a

Let us pray... O God,

We thank you for calling us into communion with you and one another
through the love of Jesus Christ the true Heir of Humankind.

As we learn to be good guests, may we learn to be good hosts,
working for social transformation through your radical “hospitality”.

Amen

Well, it’s another Sabbath and another opportunity for those wily religious experts,
the Pharisees, to catch Jesus breaking the law.

They are still trying to get him on a technicality for flaunting the Sabbath
and provoking the powers that be.

They would finally get him, but that would only be after
he was ready to be taken at a time of his choosing.

This story is linked with another continuing theme this summer –

First Century rules of hospitality and being a good guest.

In an earlier Gospel lesson we heard this summer,

Jesus was the guest of a Pharisee who invited him to dinner...

When a young woman enters the dining area, she proceeded to anoint Jesus’ feet
with expensive oil, and wipe them with her hair!

The host was scandalized by her behavior and by Jesus’ tolerance of it,
but then Jesus points out how the host had ignored certain customs
about making Jesus feel welcome as his guest...

There was no water provided to cleanse Jesus’ feet – and in those days,
most people had to walk everywhere they went.

There was no kiss of greeting – though these days we would greet someone
by shaking hands or even giving them a hug.

There was no anointing the guest’s hair with oil,
which would certainly have been refreshing in a desert land.

We might assume these customs were neglected as a passive aggressive response
because of Jesus’ periodic disregard for religious custom.

Willard, p.2

These days, disrespect has become an art form in and of itself.

There is actually something called 'battle rap' where young men take turns insulting each other with poetic obscenities.

Oh, and young women do this, too.

So it is not just political debates where that happens – though at least the rappers try to *rhyme*.

Isn't it timely when you think about it, that we need to rediscover hospitality and being a good guest, as core values for what it should mean to be a Christian, which I believe should mean the same thing as being a mature human being.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus was again the guest of another one of those Pharisees, whose other guests were most likely Pharisees and some of the disciples, as well.

Just before Jesus offered his guidance about hospitality there were a couple things that took place...

Now, among them all was a person with edema – Edema is an unsightly swelling of stomach and legs which might have been disconcerting for dinner guests – but then again, maybe this was not the case.

It is possible that this person with the edema was a valued guest, too – someone they all knew.

Jesus asked them all whether it was right to heal on the Sabbath – and when none of them answered, he just healed this person.

When Jesus said to invite the impoverished and infirm people to their feasts, he may have been affirming them for having the person with the edema present as a guest.

If so, Jesus was urging them to take the next step of inviting outcast people they didn't yet know into their fellowship.

Jesus also provided some encouragement to practice humility themselves – especially to anticipate when they might find themselves on the fringes of social acceptance.

It is better to sit in the back of a room rather than assume you have a front row seat – allowing for the option that your host may honor you with a better seat.

So, who or what do we *give place to* in our lives? Who do we dare invite? or exclude? To whom do we offer the best seats? Do we just let anybody into our homes? our lives? our church?

Do we really mean, 'No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here?'

Willard, p.3

Not easy. Not easy for me. I find there is a flip side to the saying,
‘When you know somebody it makes a difference.’

Then, what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, applies about judging people
on ‘the content of their character’ instead of their stereotype.

Even so, Jesus warned us we would know the difference
by the outcomes of what people say and do.

What thoughts do we *give place to* in our minds and therefore our hearts?
Should we be tolerant... even of intolerance?

Do we ‘look the other way’ in the face of things that are not acceptable –
instead of facing such problems with the courage to
‘turn the other cheek’ if necessary? Not easy...

When we can, we must find a way to question bad behavior
without falling into the trap of doing the same ourselves.

I have seen an example of this recently
of someone pushing the positive even against an enormous negative.
Pastora Margarita Romo of the farm-worker community in Dade City,
is no stranger to peacemaking that calls for reaching across the aisle
or whatever the dividing line is, in order to call forth the best –
in her opponents.

She is a Republican by the way,
and that affiliation has served her well in getting the ear
of those ‘who have ears to hear’
for the sake of immigrant farm-workers.

I believe that is what God does with us – patiently working to get our attention,
sometimes through awkward or painful circumstances,
to bring forth the best of who we are.

I believe that is what is happening to the Christian “Church” these days
in America and throughout the world –
in that, Christianity is not just about preserving tradition,
but responding to what is needed, now, and not just in the time to come.

Personal salvation is not the only reason for Christ’s mission,
yet it is a necessary ingredient for social transformation
through the healing, loving, and liberating power of God in Christ.

I believe that recent lectionary texts on “hospitality” and “being a good guest”
reflect a core theme that has always been present throughout our scriptures.
We notice this now, because our world desperately needs grace.

Being a good host or a good guest does not mean putting up with bad behavior.
Jesus challenged the Pharisees for their hypocrisy
and would no doubt call out the Religious Right these days
for their collusion with activities that compromise Christian values.

Willard, p.4

Kerry Walters is a Catholic priest and professor, who made these comparisons in a recent article for the Huffington Post; He writes:

*Both Testaments [of the Bible] ... call for radical hospitality to the stranger.
The Religious Right wants to close the borders.*

[Jews and Christians are obligated]
to care for the orphaned, widowed, and poor.

*The Religious Right despises "welfare bums."
[The Bible warns] against the abuse of power,
while offering only a handful of observations about sexual conduct.
The Religious Right obsesses over sexual morality
to the point of lechery,*

but remains relatively silent about social injustice.

Jesus' moral teachings... center on nonviolent love.

*The Religious Right never saw a weapons procurement bill
it didn't back.*

*Again and again, despite its biblical rhetoric,
the Religious Right favors Caesar over God.*

*This arrogant doublespeak has not gone unnoticed,
and it's undermined the credibility of Christianity in America.*

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-religious-rights-last-gasp_us_5790d94fe4b0a86259d0d897

Another posting I found on the internet about this tension with the Religious Right's values is by Brandan Robertson an evangelical Christian and activist for LGBTQ issues.

In his essay, "The Gospel of Jesus IS a Social Justice Gospel", he writes about young conservative evangelical Christians' changing perspective; He writes:
*We don't even want to be called Evangelical, let alone liberal or conservative.
But that's just a side note.*

*More and more Christians are seeing the great value of social justice
and how living these commands to love the unlovable, feed the poor,
and heal the sick are actually clearer and better proclamations
of the Gospel of Jesus than preaching or witnessing could ever be.*

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/revangelical/2014/05/28/the-gospel-of-jesus-is-a-social-justice-gospel.html>

Though some evangelical Christians are moving towards advocacy for such traditionally liberal issues as equal marriage, the environment, and gun control, there is still an indictment of liberal Christians for not doing enough to proclaim salvation through a personal relationship with God through Christ.

I believe that criticism is true about liberal – or progressive Christianity, that progressive Christians could do more to be familiar with the Bible, to utilize prayer, and talk about one's love for God through Christ and through the church.

Willard, p.5

There's all kinds of categories these days for what school or tribe to which Christians self-identify:

Traditional, Evangelical, Emergent, Progressive, Conservative, Fundamentalist, or even *Revangelical*,

but what remains for us as Christians to be Christian is that the message of salvation is connected with social transformation.

What we offer the world is both:

a personal relationship of love with God through Christ –
that God loves all people, that you are loved by God
and that we should love one another.

The Kingdom is nigh and not just by and by, up in the sky,
but a beloved community now, too,
and that we should work for it.

We of the United Church of Christ at the Villages,

seek to be a community of faith that is open & affirming

that there is a place for everyone at the table in the House of God.

And the best seats in that house are the ones we give up
to make room for one another.

Amen

Our lesson from Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 reminds us of the radical hospitality – loving-kindness in action, that was practiced by the early Christians, and that ‘social justice’ is the love of God in action through us...

- ¹Keep being concerned about each other as the Lord’s followers should.
 - ² Be sure to welcome strangers into your home.
By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.
 - ³ Remember the Lord’s people who are in jail and be concerned for them.
Don’t forget those who are suffering, but imagine that you are there with them.
 - ⁴ Have respect for marriage. Always be faithful to your partner, because God will punish anyone who is immoral or unfaithful in marriage.
 - ⁵ Don’t fall in love with money. Be satisfied with what you have.
The Lord has promised that he will not leave us or desert us.
 - ⁶ That should make you feel like saying,
“The Lord helps me! Why should I be afraid of what people can do to me?”
 - ⁷ Don’t forget about your leaders who taught you God’s message.
Remember what kind of lives they lived and try to have faith like theirs.
 - ⁸ Jesus Christ never changes! He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.
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- ¹⁵ Our sacrifice is to keep offering praise to God in the name of Jesus.
 - ¹⁶ But don’t forget to help others and to share your possessions with them.
This too is like offering a sacrifice that pleases God.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 14:1, 7-14

¹One Sabbath when [Jesus] went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him.

⁷Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them,

⁸“When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor,

lest a more eminent [person] than you be invited...

⁹and [the one] who invited you both will come and say to you,

‘Give place to this man,’

and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you,

‘Friend, go up higher’;

then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.

¹¹For every one who exalts himself will be humbled,

and [those] who [humble themselves] will be exalted.”

¹²[Jesus] said also to the [person] who had invited him,

“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors,

lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid.

¹³But when you give a feast,

invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind,

¹⁴and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.

You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

of nothing that's done more damage to American Christianity than the Religious Right.

hat the movement's prophets sanctimoniously shout from their pulpits, it's not secular , gay marriage, abortion, the ACLU, evolution, porn, or the ban against school prayer t eroded Christianity in this country.

ptied churches is the unseemly ambition of Religious Right leaders like Jerry Falwell d son), James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, and Franklin Graham to crown s moral police and political powerbrokers. Make no mistake about it: politics is the tail this dog. From Day One, the Religious Right cynically hijacked Jesus as a front man for l agenda.

eligious Right has now jettisoned any pretense to being genuinely Christian. How else to embrace of a presidential candidate who's as far from being a Christian as a starfish is g a star? The endorsement has the feel of a last-ditch, at-any-cost attempt to hold onto al power the movement's enjoyed for nearly forty years.

g, it's the Religious Right's final gasp.

this because I'm one of those liberal Christians who, as a clerical colleague of mine ally states, "believe whatever they want to as long as it makes them feel good." I'm pretty traditional Christian, although not, perhaps, enough of one for my conservative d certainly too much of one for my liberal friends.

e to what C.S. Lewis called "mere Christianity": a holding fast to central doctrines, e through revelation and reason, coupled with a willingness to welcome or at least hear breadth of moral, spiritual, and theological positions. Mere Christianity embraces the irit of St. Augustine's "in necessary things unity; in uncertain things freedom; in charity."

's counsel sticks in the craw of the Religious Right, whose leaders demand lockstep the political goals they morph into "Christian" principles.

llenged, the Religious Right exhibits the denunciatory spirit of the Taliban, even if it stops e latter's nasty practices. From the 1979 launch of the Moral Majority to the present day, ment has thunderously called down God's judgment on anyone who refuses to embrace Time Religion version of Christianity it hucksters for political gain.

Bible-thumping, the Religious Right shows scant respect for scripture, cherry-picking passages that best fit its social and political agenda and ignoring others.

aments, for example, call for radical hospitality to the stranger. The Religious Right lose the borders.

d Christian Scripture obliges us to care for the orphaned, widowed, and poor. The Right despises “welfare bums.”

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again, despite its biblical rhetoric, the Religious Right favors Caesar over God. This doublespeak has not gone unnoticed, and it’s undermined the credibility of Christianity in

he media can’t seem to get enough of the Religious Right’s antics—after all, reportage of s sectarian positions makes for good copy—thousands of otherwise thoughtful people ve that the Religious Right and Christianity are synonymous. Thanks to this confusion, otherwise might have explored the faith with open minds and hearts are repelled by it.

, national surveys routinely reveal that [Millennials](#) turn away from Christianity primarily hey’re turned off by the Religious Right’s joyless puritanism. Data also show that a rtion of once-churched Christians—“[nones](#)”—leave because of the Religious Right’s intolerance and transparent politicking.

od news is that the tide seems to be turning. The Religious Right’s jaundiced al endorsement can’t but reveal the movement for what it is: an unscrupulous political hat has nothing to do with genuine Christianity and everything to do with lust for his exposure surely numbers its days.

we mere Christians, begins the uphill work of rehabilitating the faith that the Religious esmirched.

www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-religious-rights-last-_5790d94fe4boa86259dod897

spel of Jesus IS a Social Justice Gospel

by [Brandan Robertson](#) 34 Comments

s leader came to Jesus and said, “What must I do to enter God’s Kingdom?” Jesus replied, ritten in



the Law and how do you understand an said “Love God and Love your neighbor.” Jesus said to Him, “Go and do this and you life in God’s Kingdom”. But the man asked, “Jesus, who is my neighbor?” Jesus said, s this guy going on a trip and he was beaten up, robbed, and left for dead. A Bishop and ignored him. A Professor of New Testament Theology walked by and ignored him as mosexual pastor walked by, saw the man, and had mercy on him. She bandaged his nd got him a hotel, food, and money. Which of these was a neighbor to the man who was The religious leader replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus answered, “Go and e...”

ern retelling of Luke 10:25-28. A few questions. Why is it that every time Jesus is asked, I go to heaven?” He ALWAYS replies, without fail, “Love God and Love People.” He never y a prayer.”, “Repent of your sin.”, or even “Get your life straight”. His answer is always and love people...” And why is it always the most unlikely, unholy, and unrighteous at Jesus has mercy on? Favor on? It’s because our God’s heart beats for the weak and Our God is passionately about His creation, His people. God extends His grace to those in st and damnable places and opposes those who are high and lofty. One cannot read he Bible and not understand that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not a God who wealthy and self-sufficient. He is for the broken, the marginalized, and the desperate. This .

gelicals are terribly afraid of the words “Social Justice.” Those words carry imprints of Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy of the early 20thCentury. We fear becoming like hich means Christ-denying liberals who see Jesus as a mere moral teacher and his death example of love, which is an undermining of the Biblical gospel. And I agree. But we row out whole concepts- especially one so near to the heart of God- just because “the o it too. One of the biggest changes that are coming in Evangelical Christianity is the abels. This began during the “non-denominational” movement of the early 21stcentury, have predicted that this movement would end. However, as a young Evangelical, I look d see the people of my generations growing increasingly weary of these labels. We don’t to be called Evangelical, let alone liberal or conservative. But that’s just a side note. more Christians are seeing the great value of social justice and how living these s to love the unlovable, feed the poor, and heal the sick are actually clearer and better ions of the Gospel of Jesus than preaching or witnessing could ever be.

Chandler, the president of the infamous Acts29 reformed and Missional Church planting released a book a year ago called "The Explicit Gospel". In the book, Chandler makes the distinction between two parts of the Gospel message, the "Ground Gospel" and the "Air Gospel". The case is that those who focus on a "Ground Gospel" focus on the individual salvation through faith in Jesus' death on the cross, and if one devotes themselves solely to this they will become self-centered and only focused on "preaching" the story of Jesus instead of Jesus' life. The "Air Gospel", he states, focuses solely on the call to bring God's kingdom to the earth through social justice initiatives to the sacrifice of the proclamation of the Gospel. His point is simple: Gospel proclamation is both doing and saying. It is both preaching and proclaiming. After his book was released, I was on the phone with Chandler and I asked how to balance these two parts of the Gospel, and his response was surprising. He said, "I've thought the Christian life is never about balance but obedience." What he was saying is that the fruit of the Gospel for the Christ follower is about following the leading of God's Spirit. Sometimes, God will call you to give to the homeless. Other times, God may call you to have a conversation." At all times, however, God calls us to love. I think Chandler has hit it on the head; it isn't anything profound, nor did it take rocket-science to figure it out. In Revangelicality, it's all about the middle ground. That is where God dwells. But more on that later.

Christian life, according to Jesus, is clearly marked by social justice. If one is not engaging in God's Kingdom on the earth as it is in heaven, that person is simply not living the Jesus way. The chief mark of a child of God and love is always an action. Love is about sacrifice. It is important to tell people we love them and that God loves them. But even better and more than that is to show them God's love for them. To be the hands and feet of Jesus in the gutter on the street. If there is one area of the evangelical reformation that has already begun it is in this area. Churches and Pastors have been rediscovering the value of social justice Christian experience and have been taking great strides forward in educating and influencing people to get involved. And this reform is happening in all theological camps. One simply has to go to any bookstore and browse the Christianity section. You will find hundreds of books in the Ghettoes and Jesus in the Junkyard. Whether it's the bestselling "Radical" series of David Platt, a conservative evangelical Pastor, or "Love Wins" by Rob Bell, an emerging Christian, the hottest books in Christianity are nearly all about social justice. This is evidence. One of my professors recently preached a sermon where they said, "If churches focus their mission and values around social justice, they are going to lose the next election." They hit the nail right on the head. Revangelicals are focused on Jesus and what he came to do. This marks a shift from "Pauline Christianity" to "Christ-Centered Christianity".

What I don't mean is that those in the Evangelical and reformed camps who rely heavily on fine-tuning the Gospel for them are believing a false or "Christ-less Gospel." Far from it! I do believe one of the major errors of the modern Evangelical movement stemming out of the Fundamentalist Controversy in the 1920's was a shift to a Pauline interpretation of the Bible instead of Christ-Centered hermeneutic. I believe that all of the scriptures should be viewed through the lens of the person and teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels. We should let Jesus be the primary interpretive lens that we view the rest of the Bible, especially Paul's letters. In the 1920's, Fundamentalist Christians, in order to guard themselves against the hope of liberalism, virtually threw out the red letters of the Bible and clinged to Paul,

cause the Modernists and Liberals were clinging to the words of Christ in regards to social and the path to eternal salvation. Instead of finding balance, the fundamentalists jumped to Pauline lens of Christianity, which led to a Pauline interpretation of the Gospel. The message became primarily about individual salvation from sin and hell and became *using* this planet to “go to heaven”. Jesus words were simply twisted to fit with Paul’s view of the Gospel in places like 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: and sisters, I want to call your attention to the good news that I preached to you, which received and in which you stand. You are being saved through it if you hold on to the preached to you, unless somehow you believed it for nothing. I passed on to you as most what I also received: ***Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he died, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures.***”

emphasis added)

It simply became that “Jesus died for *our individual sins*.” The problem with this is that favors the personal Gospel over the “cosmic Gospel”: the idea that Jesus lived, died, and *redeemed the whole of creation* and to *bring God’s Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven*, or in order, to reverse the curse of evil. The personal Gospel misses a **large** portion of the historic Jesus and minimizes the effectiveness of Christ’s mission and sacrifice on the cross. When one views the Gospel in the way Jesus viewed the Gospel, as cosmic redemption, become passionate about joining with Jesus in the recreation of all things to reflect the heir perfect creator and building God’s Kingdom, which includes primarily acts of social and secondarily, acts of “evangelism and discipleship.” As I said earlier, both are vital. But truly more important to Jesus. When we *live* the Gospel out in tangible ways, we will live in a very *real and physical way* which will draw people to us, giving us to opportunity to meet to Jesus. Evangelism is much more powerful, biblical, and effective when ***we before we preach.***

Here are common objections to this claim. Matt Chandler says in his book, *The Explicit* to fill empty bellies, to build shelters for the homeless, and to put silver and gold in the purses without any concern for the eternal nature of their souls is an exercise of futility. should always be the Gospel.” (Page 198) I understand Matt’s concern. Please hear me, I refuse to fall into the same rut that many mainline Protestant denominations have. Social-oriented millennials aren’t abandoning the “personal Gospel” of justification by faith in Christ in the least. But it seems to me that the example of Jesus, our Lord, was to feed the poor, he sick not *before*, but *as* the proclamation of the Gospel. When the poor feel love, they experience liberation, and the broken are healed, they are drawn to their knees in coming to the one who has done the miracle of restoration- Jesus. The difference is the The “personal Gospel” emphasizes the individual’s sins. The “cosmic Gospel” focuses on freedom from slavery that all of creation is subjected to and calls all humanity to submit to the loving of Jesus the liberating King for new life and personal forgiveness, yes, but even more the coming with God in our original purpose, to reign and create a Kingdom free from the that enslaved us. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of *that* work?

his the [worship] that I choose: to lose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the oppressor and the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and to hide yourself from your

own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and aling shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”

Isaiah 58:6-10

www.patheos.com/blogs/revangelical/2014/05/28/the-gospel-of-jesus-is-a-stice-gospel.html