

Let Mutual Love Continue

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14,1, 7-14

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, September 1, 2019

Our book discussion group has been discovering story after story in David Brooks' book The Second Mountain about people who are breaking through societal boundaries and addressing the growing fragmentation and loneliness in our society. It is striking how many of these stories include gathering people around a meal. For example, Kathy Fletcher and David Simpson started to include kids from their D.C. neighborhood when they realized that one of their son's friend often went to bed hungry. By now, they have an average of 26 youth at their table every Thursday night, most of whom have already experienced intense trauma. Five or six of them are likely living either with Kathy and David or a nearby friend at any given time because they otherwise would be on the streets. A variety of adults attend as well. David Brooks was invited along by a friend and was greeted at the door by a vibrant young man donning dreadlocks who proceeded to give Brooks a big hug. He now attends regularly.

The meal itself is always the same spicy menu. There is always much laughter. Then, about a third way through the evening, people are asked to share something they are grateful for, something others don't know about them or something else that is pertinent to their life at this time. On a given night someone might celebrate getting their GED while someone else comes out about their sexual orientation or shares about an art project while yet another is honest about feeling depressed while another shares about how the love they feel at the table has allowed them to embrace themselves more deeply. After the meal, they also take time to sing together.

The concerns expressed in the circle are not ignored. In time, people offer their gifts and resources to find solutions, offer an affirming word and an intentional embrace. One young woman once shared that she needed a kidney transplant and could not get her insurance to collaborate, let alone find a kidney donor. The young woman now has one of host David Simpson's kidneys and someone who knew how to deal with insurance got the insurance company to cooperate. A number of youth are by now in college because others supported

them in their learning and those who could even helped to pay tuition. After all, the people who gather every week refer to their group as *All Our Kids* although hardly anyone is a blood relative of each other and represent different races and ages. And while the young people are especially supported, the adults also find themselves embraced and prayed for by people much younger than they are. It is truly an experience of committed and faithful mutual love. All are fed well beyond what the actual meal has to offer. Everyone comes with both their human need and their potential and are received for who they are.

Compare this to the meal Jesus witnesses. He has been invited by the leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath along with other people, likely many of them fellow Pharisees. Pharisees were known for their strict and faithful observance of the law of Moses, seeking to live a righteous life. Earlier, while people were beginning to gather for this Sabbath meal, they saw how Jesus healed a man with great joint pain (Luke 14:2-6). Remember that any work, including healing, was technically forbidden on this day of rest. By now, the guests are “watching him closely” (Luke 14:1). Jesus has been watching them closely as well as they are taking their actual places at the table. He notices that people are choosing “places of honor.” People are probably jockeying to sit as close to the host as possible to be able to be noticed, perhaps make a wise comment or at minimum have others remember that they were seated next to someone of power and influence. It sounds like a calculated maneuver in the hope of harvesting fruits of influence now and down the road. Or maybe they are simply already assuming their place of status based on previous accomplishments and would be greatly offended if someone else dared to sit to the left or right of the assumed leader.

As Jesus watches this going on, he tells them one of his stinging parables which are always designed to turn our assumptions upside down. He asks them to imagine going to a wedding feast and seeking out a place of honor only to find themselves publicly shamed by being told to get up and leave their spot for someone else (Luke 14:9). They would all recognize this as a most humiliating experience. Jesus tells them to choose to seat themselves at the lowest place and wait for the host to invite them to a more central place. Jesus then speaks directly to the

other guests and says, “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 13-14).

Notice the emphasis on not looking to get repaid. Jesus is not just trying to give tips on how to best play the game of table politics. He is asking them and us to let go of shaping our relationships based on calculated allegiances or political maneuvering that keeps you in a game of creating winners and losers. It also leaves many people excluded from the table in the first place. Such maneuvering usually seeks the highest dividend for ourselves rather than the whole. More fundamentally, Jesus is challenging everyone to base their sense of worth and belonging on their primary status as children of God, not any societal or religious measures of importance and accolades. Therefore he says, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

My hunch is that Jesus is actually speaking of a table at which every seat is a place of honor because every life matters the same to God. It is so beautiful that those of you who have dedicated yourselves to the ministry of our soup lunch very intentionally create an atmosphere where everyone belongs and is honored in the same way, no matter how much money or education or so-called wits about them they might have. You are offering food and love and the message that our self-worth is based on the amazing gift of life and love given to us all by God who moves in and through us.

In our story for today, Jesus is also already hinting at a great reversal of expectation which will be spelled out more fully in next Sunday’s Gospel text where the lame and poor become the guests of honor because everyone else is too self-important and preoccupied to recognize their dependence on God and each other. In these passages, Jesus is asking for a shift of consciousness, imagination and shared norms and values. David Brooks’ book is in many ways in tune with the teachings of Jesus who called for a shift from more individualistic, ego-based living to committed relational living for the good of the whole. As Jesus teaches and Brooks

writes, individual agency is important but is imbedded in a humbling and empowering network of relationality.

These relationships are forged by a shared story, values and norms taught and exemplified through the parables Jesus tells and the way he lives his life. As Christians we affirm that his very life, including his death on the cross and the affirmation of the resurrection teaches us that it is through losing ego focused selves we rise to a much greater belonging. Our common life can be transformed when we each give ourselves to upholding our broadly defined community in a mutual but not calculated interchange of giving and receiving love (all of which is modeled in the inter-relationality of the Trinity as a symbol of mutually interchanging love).

The Letter to the Hebrews exemplifies some of these norms and values based on Jesus' story (though I don't necessarily connect with some of the interpretations of the author). Our text for today starts with the admonition: "Let mutual love continue (13:1)." This love is in part expressed through the kind of hospitality exemplified by hospitality to strangers who just might turn out to be angels come to change your life, as Brooks experiences in the intentionality at AOK. It is a love that stays in touch with experience and seeks to live out of true compassion – a suffering with another – rather than pity which still keeps us isolated from each other. As the writer of Hebrews writes, Christians who themselves have experienced persecution and prison are called to minister to those in prison as though they themselves were behind bars (13:3).

Our text also emphasizes that covenanted relationships require faithful commitment and handling of the consequences when promises are broken (comments about marriage and adultery). This is true though I must say that I find myself more focused on grace filled restoration and mutual accountability when commitments are violated than on the threat of divine judgment exemplified in this letter. Interestingly, the author of Hebrews also urges Christians not to fall for the love of money which too often separates us from others. (Even when affluence turns to sharing out of its abundance, it is often done in ways that does not address the structures and attitudes that support the imbalance in the first place.)

All of these admonitions from the letter of Hebrews are grounded in faith in the deeply abiding and providing love of God. This is a God who will not leave us forsaken (13:5-6) but has walked with us and our ancestors from the beginning of time. In Christ we are taught the foundational rhythm and endlessly same patterns of a life that is renewed precisely when it gives of itself away. This is also at the heart of sharing in communion together today. At this meal let us remember that we value that every seat is a seat of honor and belonging. As we serve each other, let us remember that we are indeed serving the living Christ alive in each other. As we eat and drink together, let us remember that our lives, too, are interwoven in our suffering and our renewal. Our shared fabric will be stronger when we address suffering and thread a story of resurrection together. Let us remember and affirm that by pouring ourselves out for each other and our wider community, the Spirit leads us in the footsteps of Christ who poured himself out and was infinitely renewed. It is in modeling our own lives on this rhythm that we offer our praise to God and find ourselves sustained in community. May this shared story and the values it touches shape and guide our striving, by God's grace, to let mutual love continue.