

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Divine Dinner Parties”
Luke 7:36-50
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Imagine for a moment that it's Saturday evening and you've invited a few friends over for the night... some friends you really enjoy hanging out with.

Maybe you're having a game night,
maybe you're going to watch a movie together,
or just have a nice meal.

Whatever it is, you've been looking forward to this. It's always a good time when you're with these friends. Seems like whenever you are together you end up laughing.

Maybe it's a group of 5, maybe 15. Some of these friends you might be closer to than others, but there's just something about the whole group getting together that you always enjoy.

So you've been getting ready. You probably cleaned up the house just a bit. Maybe you've been cooking one of your favorites.

And your friends are starting to arrive now. They are roaming around your house. After all, this isn't the first time they've been there. So they make themselves at home.

The food is still cooking so you set out some appetizers. You're moving back and forth between the kitchen and the living room. You've made sure everyone has something to drink. And now you're talking with someone in the kitchen while you stir the pot on the stove.

In fact, you're so busy talking and finishing up the cooking, when the door bell rings you holler out, **“Hey, can somebody get that?”**

You assume it's someone else you've invited to the party. You assume it's part of the gang. In fact, the last person in the world you'd expect it to be is that neighbor up the street who is always borrowing your tools and not returning them.

We'll call this neighbor “Roy.” Roy gets on your nerves just a bit. He always talks more than you want to listen and is always asking for another favor.

And apparently Roy came down to borrow something again tonight... oblivious to the fact that your driveway had several cars in it... which might mean you're busy.

So he rang the doorbell.

And the door is opened by one of your guests. He asks, in his Roy-like way, “Hi, can I borrow a drill and some bits?”

“Um, of course! Come on in.” your guest says, because you see, your guest that opened the door is John Barth, and let's be honest, John is a better Christian than you... or he's at least a better Christian than me. And John would assume that this is just perfectly fine. Of course you'd let your neighbor borrow your drill.

And before you have any idea what is going on, John has now turned your neighbor, Roy, into another guest for the night. You know how John is. “Do you want something to eat while you’re here? Can I get you anything? How about a drink?”

You have no idea this is happening. You’re still in the kitchen, stirring the pot. Getting things ready.

So once you walk out into the living room to announce that dinner is ready, Roy is already sitting, talking with everyone, and eating appetizers with a drink in his hand like he belonged there.

Now if I were the one hosting this party, I’m sure I’d be pretty annoyed at my neighbor. It’s not that I couldn’t let him borrow my drill... although I may be hesitant if he has already been collecting other tools at his house. I’d mostly be mad because this is not the party I planned... with the people with whom I planned to spend the evening.

Roy doesn’t *belong* in this group. You know the feeling, right? I mean, now what am I supposed to do? Pull up another chair to the table? Or kick him out like an uncharitable Christian in front of our friends? (Not very pastor like, is it?)

While I would be trying to figure this out, John Barth would already be moving the table settings around to make space for Roy... because John is a better Christian than me.

That is, after all, what Jesus would most likely be doing... setting another place at the table. Welcoming Roy when he wasn’t really welcome.

Right in the middle of this nice dinner party that Simon the Pharisee is throwing, this scandalous woman starts making this scene and Simon is just so frustrated. Can you blame him? Wouldn’t we all be?

She doesn’t *belong* and Simon probably wants to send this woman away even more than I’d want to get rid of Roy. But she’s washing Jesus’ feet and he can’t exactly make her stop that without making things worse. After all, he hadn’t offered Jesus anything to wash his feet.

Jesus of course, does make things worse. He draws attention to the woman and simultaneously praises her while insulting Simon in front of everyone there at his house.

It’s quite a scene... and it’s probably not anything at all how Simon thought this dinner party would go.

But that’s what happens when the gospel gets past the front door of our houses and is set loose in our homes. It’s a bit explosive. It comes alive in profound ways. And Luke seems to want us to see that. **The mystery of the good news of Jesus takes on greater life, and meaning, and power, when it is let loose in your home... and especially with others gathered around the table.**

I hinted at this some last week, but I want to make sure we get this, because Luke sure seems to want us to get this. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, there is a consistent theme centered on hospitality

and the power that the gospel has when we are practicing hospitality...
and most especially hospitality in our homes.

Remember this isn't the first meal, in the first home, about which Luke has told us. It's happened before and it's happening here. The gospel, the good news, takes on new life when people are gathered at Simon's dinner table.

And it keeps happening.

And the gospel takes on life when Jesus goes to Zacchaeus' home.

And the resurrection power of the gospel is recognized when the two men on the road to Emmaus invite the stranger into their home and they start to share a meal with him, and suddenly, in the stranger at the dinner table, they encounter the resurrected Jesus.

And when Jesus mysteriously shows up to the rest of the disciples and they are in shock looking at the scars on his hands, he asks them the most playful question. **"So, do you have anything to eat?"**

You see something quite powerful, joyful, and mysterious happens when we are sharing a meal together. What seems like the most basic, simple act can actually be profound and sacred.

When you invite someone into your home to share a meal with you, you are creating a deeper level of community. You are welcoming them into your life, into your world. It might not seem like a big deal. And maybe nothing in particular takes place.

But when you invite someone into your home, you are becoming an expression of God's welcome to them. And that *is* quite profound.

Through you they are receiving the hospitality of God.

Through you they are experiencing "belonging" in God.

And together, your divine dinner party can become the sacred community of God.

In fact, this is a big part of how the early church was formed and began to take on new life. Luke continues this theme when he writes the Book of Acts.

When he describes what the birth of the church was like in Acts 2:46, Luke writes, "Day by day as they spent much time *together* in the temple, they broke bread at home [together] and ate their food with glad and generous hearts."

In other words, they were sharing meals in one another's homes... and this became the place where the community of God began to be formed.

In fact, this simple practice then became part of the foundation of the early church's spirituality, and the reason for its explosive growth.

You see the Roman world shared something in common with our world today. There was a significant shift in the network of cities and new population centers. Suddenly people were much more mobile than they had ever been.

In fact it's estimated that in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabus were commissioned, the population was denser in that time than the density of New York's Manhattan Island.

People were crammed into these dense cubical apartments with no chimneys, no plumbing, and no heating. They used chamber pots and open-pit latrines for bathrooms.

People had left their homes, their communities, and their families for new economic opportunities in the cities. They became citizens of the world, but found that the world was a lonely and impersonal place.

They had no sense of belonging.

They were isolated individuals, in a sea of individuals.

It's a lot like what many people experience today, moving somewhere for a job... Working in towns far from where they grew up.

Families distant... or maybe just dysfunctional.

Workplaces competitive and impersonal.

So as the church is practicing hospitality, welcoming strangers into their homes... people experienced a profound sense of belonging. It's not that they had some flashy program or growth strategy. They simply lived the gospel by loving one another in very personal, real ways....

like sharing meals in their homes.

In a lonely world, the church was a place where you could find "**belonging**," where you could be known.

In fact, this was one of the things about which the early critics of Christianity complained. You can learn a lot about the early church by what its critics said about its. One of the great early critics was a philosopher named Celsus.

Celsus criticized the Christian movement as not being very intelligent. In fact, he points out that Christians won their converts not through theological or public debate, (the way he thought it should be done) but through quiet witness in their homes.

"In private houses," he complained. ¹ "[They kept inviting] **wool-workers, cobblers, laundry workers, and the most back country, simple minded people, who would not dare to say anything in front of their elders...**"²

In other words, the church's outreach was pretty simple... and also quite radical. It kept breaking all the normal social divisions of class, and ethnicity, and gender roles that structured the Roman world... that was really unnerving for the social order.

They allowed women in places of leadership.

They embraced children.

They treated slaves with unusual kindness and dignity.

¹ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to*

² Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010), 57.

When you read the critics of the early church, it's pretty apparent that something profound was happening,
and the church was growing in unexpected ways.
Not because they were all a bunch of articulate philosophers,
but because they were welcoming... they were welcoming all kinds of people... and they welcomed them into their homes...

They were living and experiencing the gospel.
Around living rooms,
and couches,
and dinner tables,
people were finding ***belonging***... and the gospel was exploding.

Don't get me wrong. The early church wasn't perfect. It had all kinds of dysfunctional people and problems. Just go read 1 Corinthians and you can get a glimpse of them. But at the heart of their spirituality they were ***creating communities-of-belonging for ordinary, everyday, broken people.***

It's part of what we here at Dayspring are called to do. In fact, this is what we mean in our mission statement, that ***as followers of Jesus, open in heart and mind, we are creating community.***

Part of our calling as a church, is to cultivate belonging.
And there is no better way to do that, than the easiest way to do that: in our homes with one another.

Now I know it's not always easy to find the time and energy to do that. Our schedules are busy. Our lives are full. But I've also been thinking more and more that maybe...
the most Jesus like thing we can do,
the most gospel, missional thing we can do,
is as simple as throwing a dinner party,
and invite some people we know and some we don't know that well.

I mean, I wonder what might happen if we as a church did that more regularly and intentionally. What if once a month... or even once a quarter, you had someone from our congregation into your home that you don't know that well?

What might happen if once a quarter all of us were in somebody else's home?
Sharing our stories at the table,
sharing our lives,
our families.

You never know what might happen. The resurrected one might just show up and all heaven would break loose.

What I do imagine is that **Roy** would enjoy having dinner with all of you... and maybe I wouldn't be as annoyed with him as I thought, and maybe I might be able to get past my frustrations with my neighbor and begin to see in him...what God sees in him.

Even if that doesn't happen I imagine myself saying good night to all my guests and even to Roy. And on the way out the door maybe he'd stop and say, "I... had a great time tonight. Thanks... thanks for including me. It meant a lot."

And I would have a mixture of guilt and joy in my gut. Because I'd have to realize that even though I didn't want Roy there, Jesus did. And Jesus welcomed him.

And just like the sinful woman at Simon's house, Jesus was sending him home with the sacred blessing he gives us all: **"Go in peace."**

Amen.

Reflection

"The church's message matters a great deal.... But the church's "life together" matters just as much, for such a community is proof that the gospel still has power to transform people's lives, to heal divisions and to provide a sense of belonging for rootless people."³ Gerald Sittser.

³ Ibid., 69.