

Sermon Oct. 30, 2016 That Dinner Conversation? Cara B. Hochhalter

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 and Luke 19:1-10

On Thursday night...and therefore we missed the ice storm...Jeff drove me into Framingham so that I could attend a writing workshop with a woman with whom I attended seminary in Minneapolis! Her name is Karen Hering, like the fish only with one "r"...and she has written this book, Writing to Wake the Soul: Opening the Sacred Conversation Within. It was wonderful to see her and I am excited to bring you some of what I learned at this two-hour workshop...because, she had us focus on hospitality...and that just happens to be a theme in this week's text! How convenient!

Let us be in prayer: God for whom we are grateful, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You've heard the story. Rich Zacchaeus who attained his wealth off the backs of the poor...for some reason yearns to see this Jesus of whom he has no doubt heard so much. Because Zacchaeus is short, he scrambles up a tree in order to see better. And the surprising twist is that for some reason, Jesus wants to see Zacchaeus better as well! And so Jesus invites himself to dinner at this tax collector's house. "I'm coming to your house tonight, Zacchaeus!"

So I want us to imagine what that dinner conversation was like? Did Jesus scold Zacchaeus for ripping people off? Did Jesus recite the laws of scripture, thou shalt not lie (deceive others), thou shalt not covet what others have, thou shalt not get rich at the expense of others...that one is not exactly in there but it is certainly in the beatitudes that Jesus spoke.. "Woe to those who are wealthy (at the expense of the poor!)"

Or did Jesus just simply share a meal with this wealthy man...seeing through his pretenses and greed...just seeing this wealthy man for who he really was...a human being like everyone else with the capacity to love, to receive forgiveness, to turn his life around? Perhaps, Jesus, did what Henri Nouwen describes as "making space for another." Free space.

Listen to this: *The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances...*

I wonder if we treat those who come into our church with real hospitality in this way...allowing them space...freedom to be their true selves. Is that how Jesus talked to Zacchaeus on that night...by giving him the freedom to see himself in a new light?

Did Zacchaeus have all his servants prepare a lavish meal for Jesus...Jesus who stood for justice and speaking truth to power? Jesus, who stood up for the poor and who certainly was on the side of the ones who were getting jilted by this man. And what do you think Zacchaeus said to Jesus over this meal? Did he grovel and apologize? Such an interesting scenario....Jesus, inviting himself to the house of this wealthy tax man....

The text says that Zacchaeus was happy to welcome ...even as those watching did a little grumbling that Jesus was going to be a guest of a sinner! Tsk, tsk!

But before they even had dinner, Zacchaeus blurts out that he will give half of all his possessions to the poor! AND if he has indeed defrauded anyone, he will give back 4 times! Once again, the exaggeration points to the largeness of the act of both confessing and changing direction. We all know this is not easy to do! Jesus praises him...calls him a son of Abraham just like the rest of us and declares that he has been saved!

Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus to his home. Here's a bit about hospitality: in the German, hospitality means "friendliness to guests"...all kinds of words come from its root: host, hostess, hospice, hospital, even guest.... And the opposite meaning is also there: words like hostile and hostage come from the same root. It is all about how a guest is treated!

How do you treat guests who come to your house? In the book of Hebrews we hear a reference to the story of Abraham who greeted with great hospitality three persons who called on him...and it turned out they were angels! Welcome the stranger for you may be *greeting angels unawares*.

Perhaps you have heard the stories of monks who welcome the stranger because they never know when it may be Jesus, in disguise. "Oh, Jesus, is it you again...come in!" When Jeff and I stayed at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, they exemplified this kind of radical hospitality...because you never know who is really entering in...??

Well, there was no disguise for Zacchaeus...he knew it WAS Jesus, right there in front of him calling him down from the tree...telling him to get off his high horse, and meet him at his house because Jesus was staying there for the night!

In this writing workshop, we were to remember a time when we were extravagantly welcomed into someone's home. I wrote about when I was still in high school but was working for a summer Migrant Ministry program and a migrant mother invited me to have dinner with her family. I wrote this:

I knew I was welcome when the young, round migrant mother embraced me at the tin door of the migrant workers' shack. Warm hands and smiling cheeks. One of her six children was hustled off the odd chair so that I could sit down. In her Spanish sprinkled with English, she urged me to share their meal! I hesitated knowing that she had many mouths to feed but also knew that this was a precious moment...for her and certainly for me. She and her family had followed the crops as they needed harvesting from Texas to Michigan, and now on the Old Mission Peninsula that jets out into Lake Michigan and dotted with cherry trees heavy with fruit.

She beamed with such joy as she handed me a warm, soft tortilla dripping with butter and with a piece of chicken, a drumstick, I think, nestled in the palm of this hand-kneaded bread. No need for plates or silverware...we ate these food parcels of warm bread and chicken together ...and it felt like a communion.

There is a "radical reciprocity" of real hospitality...give and take. It cannot be one sided. Perhaps we all know people who seem to be all takers...but we also know those who are extravagant givers...of time, of attention, of love, of compassion, of feeding those who are hungry, of welcoming the stranger. We will be offering a meal to strangers next Sunday...what a gift that will be for us!

In Arabic, the word for hospitality, *Djiwar*, means that neighborliness is granting refuge to wayfaring strangers who are not a member of your tribe...The poet Naomi Shihab Nye, whose parents are American and Palestinian, has a wonderful poem entitled "Red Brocade" in which she writes poignantly about hospitality.

The Red Brocade

*The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
Feed him for three days
Before asking who he is,
Where he's come from,*

*Where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
Enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be such good friends
You don't care.
Let's go back to that
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.
No, I was not busy when you came.
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone puts on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.
I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.*

How often we claim busyness as an excuse, not to connect with one another, let alone a stranger...*No, I was not busy....we will snip fresh mint into your tea.*

Someone said that in Nicaragua, when you visit a home, even as a stranger, you are greeted with the words, "I have been waiting for you!" And of course the expression I heard so often in Colombia, South America, "Mi casa es su casa." My house is your house....what generosity of spirit!

I love that Jesus gave this tax collector, a chance to be hospitable to him! Perhaps Jesus saw the spark of divinity in Zacchaeus? Seems to me he was telling the tax collector that there was hope for him.

Apparently there is an old Jewish custom of never stepping on a scrap of paper left on the ground lest the name of God might be written on it. And if we apply this to our fellow human beings, or all living creatures as well...we might say, "The name of God is written on your soul, so I will not despise it!"

We have much to learn about real hospitality, don't we? How careless we often are with each other...and those who knock on our doors or call us on the phone...We live in a suspicious age...how often I hang up on sales people. The other day I was talking to a customer service person for my phone...she had an accent and perhaps she was

in Italy, I do not know where, but after the business was done, I told her to have a good night...thinking that this was a human being, after all, why not add a little friendliness to the conversation. But then she said the strangest thing! She said," Are you alone? It is so quiet there. Are your childrens there...can I talk to them to see if they are all right?" What!?! I hung up!

In this suspicious time that we live in, perhaps we can learn from Joan Chittister who wrote: *"Hospitality is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time."*

Jesus, knew this.