

## **Westgate Baptist Community**

**Sunday 13 June 2004**

### **Hospitality is about more than just good food..**

A sermon by Geoff Wraight

Luke 7:36 – 8:3

#### **Intro**

For over six years now I have been part a group of inner urban Baptist Pastors that I helped form when I was involved in Elsternwick and St. Kilda Baptist. There are about dozen of us but at times it was bigger than this and at times smaller. We meet once a month for lunch for mutual support, sharing and prayer. For quiet a few of those six years the group struggled to find some continuity and consistency and there were a few times I wondered if it was worth it.

We still meet once month to this day but now there is a now strong sense of group identity and close and supportive friendships. I wouldn't miss one if I could help it. Something happened a couple of years ago that transformed our gathering into a true group of friends. When we started we thought it best to meet in one the Pastor's churches each month and being all busy pastors, we agreed to make the most of the time by bringing our own lunch then sharing needs and prayer.

I have this memory of a couple of years ago sitting in circle of chairs in the cold drafty room at the back of St. Kilda Baptist Church, munching on our cold sandwiches and trying to think of a good reason why I needed to leave early.

What transformed the group was the realisation that it was the eating together that needed to be the focus and not the just the functional duty that it was. People by default started providing soup and simple nibbles to supplement our sandwiches until we realised that it was in the giving and receiving of hospitality that the life of the group was to be found. We now have an agreement that the hosting pastor actually acts as the host and provides a simple meal and welcome to place.

The food we share is not that much different that what we brought in our lunch bags, but the meal has been transformed into time of love and warmth, of laughter and sometimes tears together. It was in the context of the meal that we shared last month here at Westgate that one of our members felt comfortable enough to reveal that he has had a re-occurrence of cancer and is undergoing chemotherapy.

What transformed the group was not just the quantity or quality of the food – it was the way food is given and the way it is received.

## **1. True Hospitality is more than just sharing food..**

Hospitality is a practice of our faith, it is about giving and receiving welcome and grace – it is something that comes from and goes to the heart.

And it is the focus of the Gospel for today that we heard read dramatically a few minutes ago.

According to the custom of the day, the dinner guests in this story would have been reclining at tables in a courtyard of Simon's home. They would have removed their footwear upon entering the house. The unnamed woman who invites herself into the scene and begins to kiss and cleanse Jesus' feet could have entered the courtyard from the street. The focus of the story is the hospitality that she extends to Jesus that Simon, the host does not.

Simon may have invited Jesus to dinner – he may have provided a meal and a place to sit but we learn later in the story that it was in the little things – simple signs of welcome and true hospitality.

When Jesus arrived the Pharisee gave him no water with which to wash his feet, no kiss, no oil for anointing his head. None of these was required, but they were gracious gestures of hospitality that were well known in biblical times.

(sometimes it is in the simplest of ways that small kindnesses and other attentions to physical comfort can convey a strong message of welcome). True hospitality is about more than just good food..

So in a scandalous act, the woman in this story offers true hospitality to Jesus and Jesus graciously receives it.

Simon is highly offended at this woman's presence and actions – especially in the light of her reputation which was apparently well known. He wonders how a prophet like Jesus would not know what kind of woman she was. Jesus responds to this challenge by demonstrating in fact that he truly is a prophet. That is in so far as prophets are those who recognize the faithful, and Jesus recognizes the faith of this woman.

## **2. True Hospitality comes from a forgiven heart –**

Jesus then uses the example of the two debtors being relieved of their debts. He explains that the woman's behaviour is a response of gratitude for what she has received from him.

Jesus accepted the woman's expression of love as a sign that she had been forgiven much. Love is a natural response of the forgiven, but the capacity to love is directly related to the ability to receive grace, forgiveness, and love.

As the paraphrase we heard puts the point Jesus is making, “.. those who live so tightly that they hardly need any forgiveness strangle their capacity to love.”

Because Simon thought of himself as pious and righteous, he had no idea what it meant to be forgiven and no awareness of his own need of forgiveness. He loved little because he had experienced so little of God's love. Because Simon did not recognize his need for forgiveness, he excluded himself from God's grace. On the other hand, because the woman knew she was a sinner, she could receive God's forgiveness, know what it meant to be forgiven and be free to love and welcome others from the heart.

The point here is not about how much we need to be forgiven and therefore if we are particularly bad people we are likely to get let off more and therefore be all the more grateful.

[When I was young, we used to often venerate and admire speakers at our church who would give testimonies about how rotten their lives were before they met Christ. The more gory and lurid detail about what they got up to before they became Christians the better – and the more we admired their faith and the more they must have been forgiven..etc.]

But what is being pointed out here is that Simon could be equally open to God's love and grace and equally able to share this with others if he could but see his need of grace.

Transparent humility before God cannot be forced or faked but it starts from realizing our need and being open to God about it.

True Hospitality comes from a forgiven heart..

### **3. True Hospitality can be risky in personal and community practice..**

The woman in the story brings a jar of expensive perfumed ointment – she has planned to anoint Jesus in grateful response to the grace of God she has seen and experienced in him. She takes the risk that he will receive her gift even though she does not know this.

She approaches Jesus who would have been reclining on pillows with the other guests – propped up on his left arm and eating with his right. She bends over his outstretched feet weeping and her tears splash onto his feet. In a spontaneous act, she let down her hair and began to wipe the tears from Jesus' feet and then anointed them

with the perfume. This was an act of hospitality, love and gratitude as we have seen but it also violated many social conventions at the time. Touching or caressing a man's feet could have sexual overtones, as did letting down her hair, so a woman never let down her hair in public. To add to this, the woman was known to be a sinner. Assuming she was unclean, she would have made Jesus unclean by touching him. So you could say that she has created a little scene here...

In other words her act of hospitality carried a risk of being misunderstood or even rejected and in fact is misunderstood by Simon. It was however arising out of a humble heart of gratitude and Jesus responded to this.

There is an inherent tension in being a life-giving faith community. We are called to be a community that offers hospitality...and we know that some people take advantage of that. We are called to be a community that is vulnerable and honest...and we know that some people abuse the privilege and the trust in communities that do this. We are called to be a community that welcomes all people, knowing we all need forgiveness and grace...and we know that by doing that we welcome people who may try to hurt us. We are called to be a community that models healthy, trusting, creative relationships...and we know that by doing this we take a risk that relationships may go wrong.

The very nature of Christian faith is that we are called to take risks, to step into uncomfortable territories and to be people who walk on the edge. We are also called to be a haven - a space that offers a place to the most vulnerable. How do we hold the two in the one place?

People need different entry points into community, depending on what is life-giving for them. Children - who should not have to deal with difficult, threatening situations - a life-giving community is one that gives them the space to develop relationships with adults in an environment that will protect them until they are able to protect themselves

Thus our Duty of Care policy is way of practically expressing our hospitality and care of people who come to us.

The hospitality Jesus modelled was always life-giving, but it was also different for every individual he met. Some people he fiercely protected. To others, he

offered a discomfoting challenge to change. The ministry of hospitality takes many different forms.

Yet we are called to be a community of grace, safety and welcome and generosity. And our corporate sense of humility and commitment to the whole is also very important in enabling us to genuinely extend welcome to new people.

Newton said something last week that has been echoing in my mind as I thought about this challenge of humility. He said that sometimes his sense of faith in God is not strong and that he comes to worship with the community of faith knowing that somehow he will be carried for awhile by the faith of others...

I think that there is something being expressed in that idea that ties in directly with what we are talking about today. Humility and openness to grace is the key to the ability and capacity to welcome others from the heart. The challenge is to see that this community of faith that you belong to – whether you have been here for two or twenty years – could be a vehicle of grace and forgiveness to you. I think it is that attitude that will transform our worship, our mission and our faith into a living, growing and welcoming place that will be a magnet to people around us.

And I think it will also result in the transformation of our space as well – as we are already seeing. Our space and building does not have to be extravagant but if our heart is one of welcome and hospitality we will want to pay attention to the little things like washing of feet and anointing of heads – which may translate into things like welcoming signs, clean toilets, warm spaces and functioning kitchens..

True hospitality is about more than just food..

True hospitality is comes from a forgiven heart.

And True hospitality is risky – but the heart of the gospel and the life of our community.

Next Sunday, we are going to share a simple meal together and bring gifts of food to be distributed. Come with an open heart, come with a sense of being forgiven and accepted, come in response to grace and I think you will be surprised by the welcome you will receive and by the hospitality you can give as well.

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