

## Two Ways To Party

*Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church, Aug 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (Luke 14:1, 7-12 & Hebrews 13)*

Many years ago, I officiated at a wedding for a Congolese couple. I really didn't know what to expect but the service was a typical wedding service, except the number of people there was very few, just a handful. It was explained that most people attended the reception rather than the ceremony itself. I had been invited to the reception as well, which was held in the local town hall so obviously was going to have lots of people, indeed it did.

When I arrived at the reception not many people had yet arrived. I wasn't sure where to go or where to sit. Eventually I found someone to ask, I explained I was the marriage celebrant. I was ushered to a seat, up the back of the room with the children. Whilst I thought that was a bit odd, I decided that I would make the most of it and talk to the kids and just observe the event from up the back. After a while there was commotion as the bride and groom arrived. All of a sudden, I was asked to move seats – move seats alright, I was now ushered up to the stage and asked to sit at the bridal table!

We all have different customs that regulate where we sit at important events or even where we sit at the family dinner table – in our house Mum sat near the stove and sink and my brother and I were separated by Dad. We were not allowed to leave the table until we were told or asked, and we could not have dessert unless we had eaten all of our main meal. I am sure you too have particular customs at the table.

Seating arrangements can be tricky, especially at weddings. At one wedding for which I was bridesmaid, for my role at dinner was to keep separate one of the other bridesmaids and a groomsman as they had been a couple but had split up and the bridal couple wanted to avoid an embarrassing confrontation at their reception.

At another wedding which I had officiated at for a family member I had to sit at the table where the brides estranged father sat, again to avoid any confrontations. Ironically I had sat at his table for his wedding many years before as the flowergirl.

Jesus helps us out with party seating arrangements. He tells us how we should party, first as guests and second as hosts. What becomes clear is that Jesus again doesn't follow the proper and expected way of doing things. He knows that as he speaks at this meal at a Pharisee's house. that the religious folk are watching him carefully to see what outrageous things he will do or say. With this in mind, he talks to the guests, he'd already watched them jockey for the best seats and now tells a story about where one should sit as guests.

In effect Jesus says don't be too big for your britches, save yourself some embarrassment by waiting to be invited to a special place. This of course is a reversal of cultural expectations as much now as then. Jesus is inviting us to be humble, to practice humility.

Then he turns his attention to the host. Jesus suggests a different kind of guest list, maybe we could call it a grace list. Don't just invite those in your circle who you know

will repay you by inviting you to their gatherings, no, take a risk and invite those who will never be able to repay you – the poor, the disabled, those on the margins of society, strangers even.

Risky yes, but a sign of the kind of kingdom that Jesus has come to bring. A kingdom where all are equal, where all are welcome. I guess this is what we were trying to achieve as we fed the homeless using the services of Orange Sky. As we sat around on the couches in my office sharing soup and bread we were blessed. Strangers trusted us with their stories, trusted us to help them, shared their troubles, educated us about the world and laughed with us.

I wonder if the host in Jesus' story took this advice on board at his next party or dinner. If he did. who showed up? What was the reaction of others at the party? What surprises were there? Who felt out of place?

Hebrews continues the theme, extends the instructions about how to behave not just at parties but in life itself. Let me summarise, show mutual love and respect, welcome strangers, remember those imprisoned, share what you have, don't love money, practice fidelity, remember those who have taught you. It recalls the experience of Abraham who welcomed three strangers and in so doing entertained angels.

Who are the angels we might be entertaining when we open our worship, our activities, our lunches, our lives to others? Angels in the faces of the homeless, the indigenous, the asylum seeker?

Jesus is calling us to such radical hospitality. Radical hospitality that will offer dignity to others. Radical hospitality is about offering an open invitation to all, that in our life together there is enough room for everyone. Radical hospitality that is a sign of God's kingdom. Radical hospitality that will in turn offer us blessing. Radical hospitality is our mission, our individual mission, the churches mission. Radical hospitality is risky, we can't know what will happen, how people will respond, what others observing us will think, but none of that should matter, it is what we are called to. Radical hospitality means acting with humility, treating others as our equals, to see God in all things and in all things see God.

The only table manners and etiquette the Christian community needs is the example of Jesus, who turned convention on its head, who humbled himself, who called us to a life of mutual love and respect, to a life of generosity, to a life where all are welcome – rich and poor, male and female, young and old, religious or not, from every race and sexual orientation.

This week who shall you offer generosity and hospitality to without counting the cost? Which angels might you entertain this week without knowing it? Amen.