

Feast of Beginnings

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Embracing Change by Practicing Hospitality

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As we begin this new academic year, we do so amid unprecedented changes:

- We begin after a summer with several staff/faculty transitions; many of us are serving in interim roles.
- We are rolling out a new curriculum.
- We are implementing a new modality, which has been fantastic for recruiting students, but also has presented some challenges and required quick adjustments.
- With the new curriculum we have added new courses, and some of these are in Spanish, as part of the MDiv in Spanish (13 students).

In addition to these Perkins transitions, SMU President R. Gerald Turner just announced his retirement at the end of this academic year. I truly believe that this presidential appointment, President Turner's successor, will be crucial for the future of Perkins. For these and many other reasons, I have been thinking, praying, and trying to come up with a plan to navigate these changes. After many days of thinking and discerning, I believe the phrase that captures my approach to this season is:

Embracing Change by Practicing Hospitality

I believe that by practicing hospitality we will be able not only to navigate these changes but also to embrace them as we define and redefine our institutional identity. Please allow me to illustrate this point.

The practice of hospitality and dealing with change often show up as questions in organizing a social event—a birthday party, a wedding, a retirement dinner—particularly when this event includes a formal meal and gifts. For example, when organizing such an event, we tend to ask these types of questions:

What elements are essential for such a celebration? What elements should be included in the program? Which ones can be deleted? What elements are negotiable? And what elements do we not care about? Similarly, when it comes to inviting guests, we ask ourselves:

Whose presence is essential? Who can be excluded? Who should be invited?

These questions, which are quite common, tend to indicate the importance of social status, and the decision-making power exercised by the host. In this process, the hosts are in control, and they can choose, based on their preferences, who should be invited and who won't be included, whose presence is indispensable and whose isn't. In many ways, and almost exclusively, the host defines the limits of hospitality and controls the levels of change.

These questions related to social events, gifts, social status, and professional favors, miss the point of the importance and significance of practicing hospitality, not only in responding to changes, but also in shaping our character and our identity.

I believe there is another way to understand and practice hospitality. Bible scholars, Christian historians, theologians, and ethicists have written and affirmed that Christian hospitality, particularly eating together, is a virtuous practice because it creates:

- A bonding experience between the host and guest
- A reciprocal connection between the host and the guest in breaking and challenging the status quo and traditional roles.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has a different idea about meals, banquets, and hospitality. In fact, the Parable of the Great Banquet will help us see the meaning and significance of practicing hospitality in responding to change. But first, let's look at the preceding stories in Luke chapter 14.

Although the Parable of the Great Banquet begins in verse 15, the previous stories provide an important setting.

Two stories precede this parable, and I believe all three stories are interconnected. Let's begin with the first one, found in verses 7-11.

In this story, I believe, guests represent our human nature; our human tendency and ambitions are depicted as self-centered. That is, as egocentric humans, we want and desire the places of honor and recognition.

All of us humans are selfish by nature. It is part of our fallen identity. Our natural tendency is to associate ourselves with the conquerors, with the powerful, and of course, to seek self-promotion, power, and to be in control.

Most of us are obsessed with the best seats in the house. Most of us tend to express disappointment when we are not properly recognized.

But Christians and Christian leaders are different, right?

Well, have you have been to a pastors' gathering?

I have, and I have seen the competitive nature at these gatherings. Some of the conversations go like this:

- I deserve more attention and the best congregation because I hold pristine academic credentials, or because of my eloquent preaching skills, or because of my leadership abilities.
- I deserve the best seats/churches based on performance: Look at my average attendance and church budget.

Basically, the underlying assumption is that I deserve better treatment—a special seat.

What about professors and theological school administrators? We are different, right?

Well, perhaps implicitly or explicitly some of us may function under the following types of assumptions:

- My leadership skills are better than any other administrator.
- My research and academic trajectory are without equal.
- My biblical/theological position is groundbreaking and far superior compared to other scholars.
- My academic field is essential; yours is, well, complementary.

So, perhaps for this reason, and to address our common self-centered nature, the parable's emphasis is precisely telling the audience not to do this:

Do not look for honor, recognition and prestige, because those who exalt themselves will be humbled (and) those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Then the second story: A word to the host (Luke 14:12-14). It is the same message, but now addressing the guests.

Again, we are confronted with my earlier questions. When you are thinking of the guests: Who do we invite?

Here, Jesus has important advice: Do not invite those who can repay you or return the favor!

Wow! That's not fair, I want to invite my friends and continue the reciprocal exclusive practice.

Jesus affirms: invite the outsiders, the powerless, and those at the margins of society.

His admonition is in clear contrast with 1st Century hospitality practices and highlight the exclusive nature of the banquet.

Hospitality in the 1st Century was an exclusionary practice reserved for elite groups and was based on reciprocal favors and designed to maintain the status quo. In this parable Jesus challenges this notion and later will condemn these exclusionary practices. But what about us?

Who do we befriend? Why?

To whom do we extend hospitality?

Who is our target group and/or audience?

Who is our target group?

Let's ask this question when it comes to our teaching method and research assignments.

Let's ask the same question about the way we interpret Scripture, and the way we craft our syllabi.

Who are our conversation partners? Who do we ignore?

Do we ignore some simply because they disagree with us? Or do we acknowledge them, but in our arguments, we shred them to pieces and embarrass them?

What kind of changes would be needed if we were to welcome the stranger among us in these academic practices?

I have been a pastor for many years and taught classes in many settings, and I am keenly aware that a sermon or lecture seldom changes an adult's mind and way of thinking.

So, no, I am not asking faculty, students, and staff to give up your positions and dismiss the importance of academic rigor and research. That's who we are and what do here at Perkins.

In fact, regarding our faculty and their teaching and research, during New Student Orientation, I praised Perkins faculty and shared with new students the importance of your research and writing. I shared that they will be challenged by your classes because of your excellent research. I also asked students to be gracious and kind in responding to these challenges.

But this also applies to us faculty and staff. I told students that I would ask you to practice hospitality and pastoral care in presenting your positions and theological research, to be kind and compassionate.

I am inviting all of you to practice hospitality as dialogue and not as monologue, where the host and guest come together and learn from one another, as a mutually transformative practice, as we move forward and face our future and the changes that come with it.

These stories in the Gospel of Luke capture the importance and significance of hospitality. Practicing hospitality, according to Luke, creates a welcoming environment that becomes subversive. It challenges customs, rules, traditions, the status quo, and even our own positions.

Could it be that this is the reason one of the guests in the story responded to Jesus with an affirmation, but perhaps such a response was sort of an excuse to avoid change?

Conclusion: An Open Table and Verse 15

¹⁵ When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

This person is in the inner circle and said, “Yes, AMEN.”

Yes, let’s practice this kind of hospitality, but certainly you do not mean here and now. Indeed, we will all be equal at the coming of your reign, and at the eschaton, but right now, that is impossible. It is a kind of utopia.

For now, let us live our lives and let us continue with our lifestyles, without any challenges or changes, much less sacrifices!

In response to such a statement, Jesus begins another parable (Luke 14:16-21a).

In this story, the first two responses, which are excuses for not accepting the invitation, depict persons with exclusive tendencies. These are persons who had the right to accept or reject invitations based on their social status. For them, to eat (share a banquet with the marginal) would be a sacrilege, a great offense.

The third person, although his excuse has to do with family ties, just got married. Getting married at that time was another way to maintain the status quo. Marriages were economic transactions, and one had to have means to host a wedding and to secure a bride.

What do these persons, these three responses, have in common?

Persons with exclusive understanding of hospitality. Persons who are averse to change and want to maintain the status quo. They see change as a threat.

Why did they decline the invitation?

Because eating with strangers/marginal persons is a risky proposition; it is mutually transformative.

The host and the guest are equally valuable, and in a dialogue grounded in respect, both the guest and the host in this banquet will be mutually transformed.

But there is more to this story (Luke 21b-23). After the three rejections, the host becomes angry and invites the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. After these persons were invited, there is still room!

Then the host says: “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.”

“Compel” is to drive or urge forcefully to cause to do or occur by overwhelming pressure. Force them to come.

Compel (Anankazo) denotes necessity; their presence is indispensable for true hospitality.

Could it be that Christian hospitality is not complete until we encounter the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind, and beyond—in a mutually transformative journey?

Could it be that our Christian life, academic research, and pedagogical practices are not complete until we listen and enter into a mutually transformative conversation with those whose voices have been ignored?

Could it be that the banquet is incomplete until the special guests arrive?!

Could it be that the outsiders were part of the banquet all along, showing the characteristics that Jesus talks about during the beginning of the dinner?

In verse 24 the parable concludes with a serious indictment, with tragic results. Those who were invited and rejected practicing generous and gracious hospitality—none of them “will get a taste of my banquet.”

This is not the outcome that we expect from Perkins. In fact, I know that our history provides evidence to the contrary.

In reading the history of Perkins in a book by Dr. Joe Allen, I know we have practiced this kind of hospitality in previous years. I know that this kind of hospitality is part of our identity, and it represents one of our core values and the character of our community.

When people ask me about Perkins’ commitment and identity, I quickly respond by highlighting the welcoming nature of our community and the theological and ethnic

diversity of our research and teaching that is palpable around us. This kind of hospitality is not only a chapter in our history; I see clear glimpses of it in our everyday life. I see great potential for our future.

I truly believe we here at Perkins are ready to face the future, which may be uncertain and ever changing. Even though theological education in today's world brings many challenges, I want to invite you and encourage you to embrace change by practicing hospitality.

May God help us with God's mercy, kindness, and grace to do so.