



Goodness is the Truest Thing about You

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn at the baptism of Kai Marshall Woodie Walker

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

I was recently at a wedding reception and went to go sit down at one of the dinner tables, only at the last second remembering that there were little names on cards at every plate, about 200 seats in the room, and I needed to go look for my name. Now it's perfectly ordinary in our culture to create seating charts for wedding receptions, and I can understand why. You want the people who don't know anyone else to have someone to talk to with something in common. The wedding couple understandably wants to sit with those they choose. There will also be people who radically disagree with each other or who have experienced life in radically different ways, and we don't know what would happen if such people sat down at a table and ate dinner with one another. It could possibly be a beautiful opportunity to connect, but it could possibly also be an opportunity for social disaster, and at a wedding reception when the marriage couple doesn't want to have to broker fights, I can understand why they arrange the seating carefully.

Who belongs with whom is one of the story lines from today's gospel reading, when Jesus is at a dinner party watching people jockey for position in the seating arrangements, so he tells a parable about what to do when you are at a wedding reception. At first Jesus just instructs us to take the seats with so-called "less" honor, so that in a world of hierarchy we will at least be moving in the right direction up the ladder instead of

down. But then Jesus invites an imagination about a totally different kind of world. When you throw a party, he says, don't invite people you know. Instead invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. He says they can't repay you, and so you will be blessed. What does he mean?

Before we explore that question further, let me ask you another question. Indulge me for a minute and close your eyes and imagine yourself walking into a social situation where you don't know anyone. When you walk in, what are you looking for? What do you notice first about the people who are there, and why? To be honest this partly depends on life experience and whether you grew up among people who saw yourselves as "us" or among people who knew beyond any doubt that the world saw you as "them," whether the "them" was queerness, or color, or ability, or poverty, or any other category you want to name. I recently read an article by Dorothy Allison, a lesbian writer from South Carolina, who grew up amid extreme poverty and violence, and who said "Entitlement is a matter of feeling like *we* rather than *they*." Most of us have hybrid identities—as a white educated middle-class person in America I have a great deal of privilege; as a woman I often don't fit into the unconscious assumptions about what is "normal". But for some of us the experience of being othered by the rest of the world dominates and we know beyond any doubt that in any social circumstance, except in the safe places where you are with others like you, you will be "they" to the rest of the group and will have to cope with whatever arises because of that.

But Jesus is beginning to imagine and to describe a world that doesn't operate like that. I asked a minute ago why Jesus would have encouraged his followers to throw dinner parties not for your friends but for people who can't repay you. That can be tricky, because I don't think Jesus is inviting us to feel noble or savior-ish or patronizing here. Instead, Jesus is giving us the chance to interact with people we might never get the chance to sit down with. And in the absence of any transaction that could benefit you, any networking you could do, any relationship you could build that might someday help you, instead the only thing left is just to see the human being in front of you on their terms, which is where we ought to begin always anyway. And what you will find is that if you will make the effort to just see someone truly, on their terms, for who they are, this simple connection with other human beings is its own reward. It transcends categories of us and them. In fact it is the whole reason we exist in the first place: for connection, for belonging. Sometimes you find more than that; sometimes, as the writer from Hebrews says, when you provide hospitality to strangers you find they are angels in disguise.

Today we are going to baptize a beautiful little boy named Kai. Baptism in the Episcopal church is both a blessing and an initiation. It is a way to affirm Kai's created goodness; God created the world and everything and everyone in it and called us all good, and that goodness and not sin is what is original about each one of us. Baptism is a blessing on Kai's original goodness, a celebration of who he is. It is also an initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Jesus' Way of Love, into an expansive, radical, liberating and lifegiving imagination about who we are and what our purpose is in this world. Baptism is an initiation into what Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven, which isn't as much about the world after you die

as it is about the real world hidden within this apparent one, the real world in which people are inherently valuable before they have any ability to provide social benefits or transactional repayment or whatever other hierarchy exists in the world where we have to worry about seating arrangements at a dinner party. When I was speaking with Kai's parents, Le'Spencer and Lauren, about what they hoped for Kai in his spiritual journey, they said they saw spirituality as a flow in which Kai could have a grounded place, a centered place, where he can know the strength and value of who he is no matter how other people treat him.

An initiation into Jesus' Way of Love is an inherently communal one. Every religious tradition has its genius, and Christianity is an inherently communal faith; by definition you can't do it alone, because even our God who is a Trinity is a community. So Kai is today being initiated into a community of faith that is both St. John's and the vast collection of followers of the original Jesus across space and time, where Kai will always have inherent value, he will always have a place at the Eucharist table. Now we will also fail each other sometimes as a community; all you have to do is to look at the history of Christianity to know sometimes we have absolutely denied the original Jesus and his teaching of love and healing and justice. But in our baptismal liturgy we have a roadmap for what to do when that happens. We have learning and repentance and making amends and beginning again built into the fabric of our spiritual lives. And today in our baptismal liturgy which contains promises we all make to one another, we are committing to be faithful to that.

Kai's name means water, which of course is the element used in baptism, and that's a beautiful thing. Water evokes creation itself, as the Spirit hovered over the water and spoke light into being. Water evokes birth and the water of the womb, because in a way this is a kind of birth, the birth of what scripture calls the new creation—the fact that God's Spirit is always making everything new, and that those who follow Jesus are born into a profound hope that death and violence and oppression are not the end; love and life always make a new beginning. Kai's name means water, which evokes the enslaved people of Israel crossing the water of the Red Sea and what it means to be liberated from bondage by a God who hears the voice of the oppressed and who cares for them. Water evokes Jesus' own baptism, in which he heard the voice of God calling him and each one of us beloved, before he had done a single miracle, before he had taught anyone anything. God was very pleased with him, and God is very pleased with Kai, not for what great things he may do and become, but for the great person he already is and always will be.

In the kingdom of God Kai and each one of us are invited to always be out there looking for the shining beauty of people in their created goodness, beyond transaction and social hierarchy and us and them, beyond false and blasphemous designations of who is valuable and who is not. We will be providing hospitality to ordinary people beyond labels, beyond categories, and sometimes we will encounter angels who will turn the tables upside down and take our breath away, and we will find that it was us being served, not the other way around.

Before we move into this baptismal liturgy, I'd like to invite us all to have a minute of silence. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, I pray for each of us the deep knowing that you are valuable, that you belong by virtue of being alive, that in the eyes of Jesus you were created good and no matter how this world views you, your goodness is the deepest and truest thing about you. Because of that, you can have the courage to see it in others. Amen.