

“The Power of Proximity: Getting Close to Our Neighbors”

Luke 14:15-24

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

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If you were here last Sunday, you heard my intention to explore “The Power of Proximity” in two parts. Last week, we examined “getting close to God” from a few different angles; this week, I’d like to explore “getting close to our neighbors.”

We’ll approach this theme, as always, through scripture. The gospel lesson is Luke 14:15-24. It is the second of two parables that Jesus centers on a dinner party. Listen again for the Word of the Lord.

One of the dinner guests, on hearing Jesus’ [first story], said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner, he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let me ask you something. Have you ever made a bad excuse? Like, the kind of excuse you *know* will be unbelievable even before it rolls off your tongue? An excuse so ridiculous that even a complete stranger could see through it? Have you ever used a bad excuse to get out of something you didn’t want to do?

I have. Sometimes, in my most introverted moments, friends call to see if I can get together, and I am struck by a sudden desire, a compulsion, an *inner mandate* even, to complete such critical tasks as watering my plants, cleaning my shower, balancing my budget, or simply sitting on my porch and watching the world go by. Don’t get me wrong. I’m all for better boundaries, but there are times when I have plenty of energy, and it’s just a bad excuse. Surely, y’all would never use one of those, right?

Jesus tells another parable, and the folks who decline their dinner invitations are full of bad excuses. Did you catch them? The host invites them, saying “Come, for everything is ready now.” When asked whether they will attend, the first one says he has to go survey a piece of land he’s already purchased. Now, I know today’s market is crazy, but in that day, you just wouldn’t have signed real estate paperwork before seeing what it got you. Likewise, the second guy has

just invested in a bunch of oxen, and it only now occurs to him that he needs to see if they were worth the price. The final one uses his recent marriage to get off the hook, a big transition to be sure, but it's still hard to see how it would keep him from committing to the banquet. After all, he has the rest of his life to spend with his wife.

The ones who were invited make bad excuses, but the party will go on without them. Determined to fill his house, the host widens his invitation. Now, it's not just the "A-List" that's included, but "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." When all those folks have arrived, there's still room, so the host issues one final invitation: "Go out into the roads and lanes and *compel* people to come in," as if anyone who were hungry would turn down a free meal.

They gather, and everybody wins. The host retains his honor. The guests are satisfied. And, the ones with the bad excuses wiggle their way out of an event they were invited to but evidently had no interest in attending in the first place. Shoulder to shoulder, the guests sit around what must be a very large table, made proximate to one another at the invitation of one whose hospitality seems to know no bounds.

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Allow me to shift gears for a moment. Around a month ago, I accompanied a group of middle school youth from Westminster to Raleigh, where we spent a week learning and serving in the appropriately nicknamed "City of Oaks." Unlike Donn James, who mentioned the trip on today's Harbinger cover and has surely chaperoned hundreds of teens in his years of faithful service, I can count on one hand the number of youth mission trips I've been on since my days in youth group. Let's just say it was as eye-opening as it was rewarding.

Throughout the week, we partnered with Raleigh Youth Mission (RYM), which sustains long-term relationships with local agencies combatting poverty and injustice. Each summer, RYM invites groups from around the region to participate in those relationships through various forms of service.

Though our time in Raleigh was relatively brief, we made a dent in several projects agencies asked us to complete, things like sorting donations, harvesting garden bounty, and serving meals. It was satisfying to see the tangible effects of our labors: hundreds of diapers stacked neatly and ready for distribution, pounds of produce piled up on a food bank scale, and dozens of children sitting around tables with full bellies. Those tasks were rewarding, partly because they were so quick and clean-cut. There was an immediate, obvious pay-off for our efforts.

However, our focus that week wasn't only on the immediate. From the beginning, RYM made it clear that we were guests, not authorities, in the space we occupied. We might participate in the work that was happening there, but real transformation would transcend our short presence. While we could chip away at the concrete tasks of sorting and serving, it was important that we also learn some of the soft skills that would serve us closer to home. For one, we needed to practice being proximate.

One particularly hot afternoon about halfway through the week, when everyone was more than ready for a nap, RYM rallied us around other plans. We were to load a cooler with those plastic-tubed freeze pops that have become emblematic of summer. You know, the ones that don't have flavors so much as colors. Personally, I prefer ones that are blue and taste like, well, blue. Anyway, we were to load the cooler and then roll it, along with some iced water and lawn games, down to Raleigh's version of Falls Park.

When we arrived, there were all sorts of people in the park. There were children cooling off at the splash pad, couples sitting together under the shade, people passing through on their afternoon commute, others walking their dogs, old people, young people, dressed up people, dressed down people, and also some people who appeared to call the park home, folks who likely slept there from night to night.

Our task, we learned, was to offer each some water and a freeze pop. Easy enough in theory, but in practice, it was a bit beyond some of our comfort zones. I'll admit it's awkward to engage with strangers, especially those who appear different than we are. RYM saw some of our hesitation and gave us a firm nudge. They encouraged our crew to not only offer a freeze pop, but also ask what color each person wanted. Pink, orange, green, red? If someone asked for more than one, we were to offer them freely. It was a simple exercise designed not only to level the playing field in the park, offering everyone equal access to a sweet and refreshing treat, but also to bring us a little bit closer to people whose experiences differed from our own.

Our trip was full of such small, yet significant, opportunities to practice proximity. By some measures, these exercises may not have been as important as meeting people's immediate needs, but as far as I can tell, they were the most urgent work we did all week. Without proximity, it's all too easy to make assumptions about our neighbors, rather than looking on them with compassion. It's too easy to judge, rather than marveling at their resilience. It's too easy to dehumanize, rather than seeing ourselves as members of the same human family. Proximity reveals our common identity as children of God and reminds us of our shared invitation to God's table.

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In our pursuit of justice and peace, proximity is not just a nice by-product; it is an essential first step. Last week, I shared about public interest attorney, Bryan Stevenson, and how his relationship with his grandmother was powerful because it was proximate. She was literally and figuratively always pulling him toward her. One of his grandmother's favorite refrains was "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close."

Stevenson bore his grandmother's advice in mind as he made his way through Harvard Law. Attracted there by the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the poor, he writes, "I felt very fortunate to have been admitted, but by the end of my first year I'd grown disillusioned...The courses seemed esoteric and disconnected from the race and poverty issues that had motivated me to consider the law in the first place."

I remember similar feelings off and on when I was in seminary. In the shadow of another ivory tower, my classes were almost always stimulating, but there were times when I wondered what bearing they might have on real people in the real world, the types of folks whose experiences had led me towards ministry in the first place. Eventually, I found my grounding in internships. Getting close to people in the pews and on a university campus, as well as those who were homeless, in hospital beds, and in a state-run psychiatric ward shaped and sustained me through my preparation for ministry.

The same was true for Stevenson, who landed an internship with the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee and never looked back. His assignment put him in proximity to people on death row. At first, he felt he had little to offer them, just his limited knowledge as a first-year law student, but he soon realized that meeting them in their humanity would gain him miles of ground.

One of Stevenson's first tasks as an intern was telling a man named Henry that his execution date had been postponed. He was nervous and apologetic, afraid Henry would be upset he didn't have better news. As it turned out, Henry was grateful for even an ounce of hope. He and Stevenson ended up absorbed in conversation, swapping stories about their lives. Stevenson writes, "I had come into the prison with such anxiety and fear about [Henry's] willingness to tolerate my inadequacy. I didn't expect him to be compassionate or generous. I had to right to expect anything from a condemned man on death row. Yet he gave me an astonishing measure of his humanity. In that moment, Henry altered something in my understanding of human potential, redemption, and hopefulness."

Now one of the most renowned civil rights attorneys in the nation, it would be easy for Stevenson to grow distant from the folks he set out to serve. Excusable, even, as he spends much of his time traveling to share the importance of his work. One could make the case that Stevenson's hours behind a desk or in front of big audiences accomplish more than his exchanges with individuals in prison, but he would beg to disagree. His proximity to people on death row animates his life and fuels his work. It helps him understand the struggles of others as if they were his own, and it renders him far more effective than if he were to serve from a distance.

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Jesus doesn't specify what kind of person the host in today's story is. He just identifies him as "some fellow," the same term used to describe people of both high and low status throughout Luke's gospel. Since we don't know for sure, let's imagine for a moment that he's someone with power. After all, it takes resources to host a great dinner for so many guests. Wouldn't you think his power would be more effectively wielded for his proximity to those on society's edges? Don't you think he'd be better equipped as a citizen and public servant, having positioned himself at a table with them? Couldn't you see how his assumptions might be challenged, his horizons expanded, and his understanding of the important things deepened? Wouldn't the lives of both host and guests be enriched?

And what about the folks who were invited but declined to attend, the ones who were full of bad excuses? In all likelihood, they didn't have a clue what they had missed. As they went on about their lives, it must have seemed like business as usual. They were in their place, and everyone else—that is, the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame—well, they were where they always seemed to be: distant, removed, far from the minds of those who occupy themselves with bad excuses.

Let me ask you again. Have you ever made a bad excuse? When it comes to getting close to your neighbors, have you ever declined the invitation with something like:

- "I'm too busy."
- "I have more important things to do."
- "I wouldn't feel comfortable in that neighborhood."
- "I wouldn't know what to say to someone like that."
- "I'd rather write a check and leave it there."

I'll admit it takes effort to position ourselves in proximity to people whose life experiences are different from ours. Having lived in Greenville a little over a year now, and cities like it before that, I've noticed how easy it would be for me to wear a path around the '05 without ever encountering different parts of town or my neighbors, who live there. I have to be

intentional about where and with whom I position myself; otherwise, I will be bound to the same old bubble.

Partly, that's by design. Neighborhoods that were historically redlined to invite some people in and keep others out still bear signs of racial segregation. We say we want a place for everyone, just "not in our backyards," so we pass zoning laws that lead to less diverse communities. The same goes for schools and some of the other spaces where we spend our time. That's not even to mention the social media algorithms that divide us into different echo chambers. We have created systems to keep us separate, and even if some of those systems are no longer set in stone, we still experience many of their effects.

For all kinds of reasons, systemic and personal, it takes effort to get close to our neighbors, but we can't let that be another bad excuse. Because if we don't prioritize the practice of proximity, we are missing out on the invitation of a lifetime without even realizing it.

Jesus' parable gives us a glimpse of where that invitation might lead: an extraordinary dinner party where all kinds of people don't just pass bread and wine from the "haves" to the "have nots;" they sit so close that you can hardly tell who's who. Stomachs are filled. Hearts run over. Lives are transformed. The kingdom of God draws near.

The invitation has been issued. "Come, for everything is ready now." Will you share in the feast?