

## **A Theology of Welcome: The Hospitable Hidden Women of Acts 2, 4, and 6**

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It was ironic that the very weekend I planned to spend working on this presentation I managed to be quite un-welcoming. I meet approximately once a month with two other women from my church – Brenda Hurst and Nancy Heisey. We had planned that they would come to my house Friday afternoon at 3, but I didn't write it on my calendar and forgot about it. So I was picking up my income tax report from my accountant when Brenda arrived, and she had to wait half an hour till I returned. All I had to serve her and Nancy was tea and two leftover chocolate chip cookies!

These are the times when one should draw solace from other examples of less-than-perfect hospitality. Fortunately, my philosophy of life is rooted not only in the Bible but in A.A. Milne's stories about Winnie the Pooh. I take comfort in the fact that I can hardly do worse than fat, lovable Pooh-bear and his reluctant friend Rabbit. Let's hear an excerpt from the chapter "In which Pooh goes visiting and gets into a tight place":

Winnie the Pooh was humming to himself and walking along, wondering what everybody else was doing, when suddenly he came to a large hole in a sandy bank.

"Aha!" said Pooh. "If I know anything about anything, that hole means Rabbit, and Rabbit means Company, and Company means Food and Listening to Me – Humming and suchlike." So he bent down, put his head into the hole, and called out:

"Hallo, Rabbit, isn't that you?"

"No," said Rabbit.

"But isn't that Rabbit's voice?"

"I don't think so," said Rabbit. "It isn't meant to be."

"Oh!" said Pooh. He took his head out of the hole, and had a think, and then he put it back, and said: "Well, could you very kindly tell me where Rabbit is?"

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“He has gone to see his friend Pooh Bear, who is a great friend of his.”

“But this IS me!” said Bear, very much surprised.

“What sort of me?”

“Pooh Bear.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite, quite sure,” said Pooh.

“Oh, well, then, come in.”

So Pooh pushed and pushed and pushed his way through the hole, and at last he got in.

“You were quite right,” said Rabbit, looking him all over. “It is you. Glad to see you. Well . . . what about a mouthful of something?”

Pooh always liked a little something at eleven o’clock in the morning, and he was very glad to see Rabbit getting out the plates and mugs; and when Rabbit said, “Honey or condensed milk with your bread?” he was so excited that he said, “Both,” and then, so as not to seem greedy, he added, “But don’t bother about the bread, please.” And for a long time after that he said nothing . . . until at last, humming to himself in a rather sticky voice, he got up, shook Rabbit lovingly by the paw, and said that he must be going on.

Those of us who have been reading the right books know that Pooh gets stuck in Rabbit’s hole because he ate too much and thus has to stay there for a week without food until he gets thin enough to be pulled out. Well, at least Rabbit didn’t have to worry about planning menus and shopping for food!

I’m going to use some Pooh-logic here to get from my assigned theme to where I want to go. Pooh says, “If I know anything about anything, that hole means Rabbit, and Rabbit means Company, and Company means food and listening to me . . .” If I know anything about anything, a “theology of welcome” means hospitality, and hospitality means homes (or tents!) and food, and food means women preparing and serving it! Tie all that in with “theology,” and it means that you have to go back to the Bible to figure out what it meant by hospitality, and then figure out from there what it can mean today.

There are two other reasons that I want to root whatever I say here in the Bible. First, the social practices of hospitality reflected there are much more similar to what takes place in developing countries than here in the West. The individualistic, technological culture of the West is far removed from our ancient texts. As we come to understand the social contexts from

which our scriptures came, we can better understand the social contexts of our sisters and brothers in the Two-Thirds world. Second, I believe that a theology of radical welcome is not something added on to the gospel of Jesus but is an integral part of it. For example, if you read any of the Gospels, but especially Luke, you will find one of the major characteristics of Jesus' life was that he ate meals with a lot of different kinds of people. Often that was what made him either loved or hated.

There are many examples of women and hospitality in the Bible, but I will just mention two in the New Testament and then focus on the women of Acts 2, 4, and 6. In Luke 10:38, Martha, apparently a disciple of Jesus and head of her household, "welcomes Jesus into her home." It would not have been appropriate for an unattached woman to invite a man into her house, but Martha must have felt comfortable enough with Jesus to do so, and even to complain to him about her sister's inhospitable behavior. Jesus obviously felt comfortable enough with her to tell her to chill out. Sometimes the most welcoming behavior is to forget making those extra chocolate chip cookies and just sit down and really listen to the visitor.

The second example is from Acts 16, where Lydia also appears to be head of her household. This is one assertive woman! First she gets the rest of her entire household (probably all her co-workers in dyeing and selling purple goods) to be baptized with her. Then, crossing gender, racial, and perhaps class boundaries, Lydia is portrayed in verse 15 as both persuasive and manipulative: "She urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us." Anyone who could prevail upon Paul to change his mind must have been forceful indeed!

But these examples are like the surface exploration of an archeological site – picking up potsherds that happen to stick out of the ground. What we need is a trench, digging down into one text to reconstruct a more complete picture of a particular theology of welcome, an entire believing community of women and men structured around hospitality through daily meals and worship together. For this, I chose Lukan summaries from Acts 2, Acts 4, and 6:1-6 [*printed in a handout distributed to participants in this workshop*].

**Acts 2:41-47**

*<sup>41</sup>So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3000 persons were added. <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute them to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread by households and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

The book of Acts is the second volume in Luke's two-volume work on the story of Jesus and the story of the church. In each case, Luke has edited his sources to show how the story of Jesus is paralleled in the story of the church, and vice versa. In the Gospel, we find Jesus being baptized by the Holy Spirit in chapter 3 and then announcing his political platform in chapter 4 by quoting Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, liberation to the captives . . . ." Then Jesus proceeds to put this agenda into action throughout the rest of the Gospel. One way he brings this good news is through the hospitality of meals. In almost every chapter Jesus is either going to, coming from, or at a meal, eating with people all up and down the social scale (except for the very rich). He's even called a glutton! The character of the kingdom Jesus is bringing about is seen at his meals.

In Acts we have both the parallel to and the fulfillment of Jesus' agenda. After he leaves the scene, his followers are also baptized by the Holy Spirit and proceed to put Jesus' agenda into action. Peter's impassioned speech in chapter 2 announces the beginning of the New Age; the Spirit is "bringing good news to the poor," to women, to slaves, to people from all over the known world. So after 3000 people repent and are baptized into the infant church, they proceed to organize themselves in a way that will bring Jesus' vision to reality. They share all their possessions with each other, as any had need, and they eat together by households every day. A second summary at the end of chapter 4 includes more details about this remarkable community of goods.

Now I can imagine some of you thinking, If this is what is demanded by a theology of welcome, I'm not ready to do that. Indeed, this kind of communal behavior has made Christians nervous over the centuries because it seems unrealistic by later standards. Most of us simply don't live that way and don't think we ought to. It sounds like communism! It challenges our God-given right to private property!

To get around these texts, four major interpretations have developed. Roman Catholics, for example, have believed that only monks and nuns in closed communities could live at such a high level of communal commitment. Conservative Protestants who believe Luke was writing accurate history assume that this lifestyle was attempted, but was impractical and thus very short-lived. It is not a model for others to imitate. A third view, articulated by John Calvin in the sixteenth century and by many others since then, stresses the spiritual unity experienced by these believers and downplays the material sharing. They had one mind and one spirit. This view overlooks the messy details of living. It's the kind of spirituality that never reaches to the nitty-gritty of life. Finally, there is redaction criticism, which is much more skeptical about Luke's historical accuracy. ("Redaction" means "editing.") Redaction scholars see Luke as an editor who shaped the story according to his own political and theological agenda. He wanted to idealize the earliest church to impress and inspire his readers, so he creates this community of goods and applies to the early Christians a Greek utopian phrase that says "Friends have all things in common." But it never really happened this way.

All these positions are held by various Christians today, but I do not accept any of them. I believe that if we can understand how normal first-century Mediterranean community life was structured, we can see how an organized community of believers who share their possessions makes sense. Instead of our capitalistic, materialistic, democratic, individualistic Western lifestyle today, what would life be like in a totalitarian, authoritarian, patriarchal, agricultural, subsistence culture? Not only would laws come from the top down, but the state itself – in this case, Rome – was a foreign oppressor, at least as bad as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank today. Those 90 percent of the people living at or below subsistence level were continually losing their land (the main source of wealth in an agrarian society) to the rich and powerful who preyed on them. The government's taxes and tax collectors

continually squeezed them dry – and the taxes only went to further oppress them, never for social services. Even the idea of democracy, human rights, equality of opportunity, or government social services to help the poor survive was beyond what anyone could have imagined.

Consequently, the only social security people had in that world was the extended family. Unless you were a social reject, you were part of a tight-knit clan. If you broke your leg and couldn't plant your barley, someone helped you out. If you had an especially fruitful harvest, your relatives expected you to help them out. You used each other's tools; you ate meals together; you raised each other's children. And so on. No one was allowed to get ahead of anyone else. This kind of kin-group sharing still exists in many parts of the world today to one degree or another, and is called "generalized reciprocity." It explains how people can survive in regions where there is 50 - 70 percent unemployment. Only in affluent Western cultures have we promoted individualism to such a degree that we can scarcely imagine such a communal lifestyle and worldview.

Imagine that you lived with all relatives in a block of houses surrounding an inner courtyard. You cook in the courtyard, you work together in some home industry. *[Instruction to participants: Stand up and talk with 2 or 3 people, name 5 things that you have in your possession now that you could share with the other people so not everyone would have to get one.]* The point is that it's much cheaper to live in a community of goods in a subsistence society. How vital it was to belong to a group. If you did not, it was social and economic suicide. Within these kin groups there was a clear division of labor by gender. There was women's work and men's work. Women generally handled food preparation and serving, took care of the goats, spun and wove wool and flax for clothing. Men did more outside work, although women also worked in the fields when needed. Men belonged to the public sphere of life; women in the private, within the home.

In similar societies, the same holds true today. I recently toured parts of Turkey. In the little villages we visited, it was the men who were consulted about what we wanted to see. Little boys flocked around us, but women and girls were usually absent. In fact, as we drove along we saw more women and children working in the fields while men sat in groups in cafes, apparently thinking and talking together about how to run their farms.

Yet in societies with large gender gaps, women often wield a lot of authority on their own turf. They may order their husbands around inside the house, or refuse to let their men inside if they haven't cleaned up well enough. An older woman may rule her three-generation household with stern discipline. And when marriages need to be arranged, it is the women who know the younger women well enough to propose who shall marry whom. The culture in which Jesus lived was organized in this way. Can you imagine, then, what would happen to people whom he called to be disciples and leave everything else and follow him? They would not have been able to survive – *unless* the Jesus-people organized their own kin-group. This is exactly what must have happened.

For instance, in Mark 10:28, Peter reminds Jesus that they had left everything to follow him. Jesus replies that “there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields . . . , and in the age to come, eternal life.” What Jesus meant is that they already had what sociologists call a “fictive kin-group,” a tightly-knit family united not by blood but by a common loyalty to their leader, Jesus. They already had what we can call the “kin-dom” of God.

Now let's take this fictive kin-group of Galilean peasants and follow them up to Jerusalem with Jesus. They did not know that their leader would be arrested, executed, and then resurrected from the dead, and that they would be staying there for quite a while longer. When Pentecost arrives and the Spirit descends and many hundreds of new people come to believe, they have to get organized big-time. Believers who live in Jerusalem must invite out-of-towners into their homes, perhaps add another room upstairs or into the courtyard. Those from other places must share the money they've brought for supplies and food for everyone. Tools must be shared; child care divided up. And so on, into a thousand details.

The sort of thing Luke talks about in Acts 2 and 4 makes perfect sense if you understand how ancient Mediterranean community life is structured. It also means that the communal meals must have been prepared and served by the women. The bread-breaking ritual, which we now call communion, would have been part of the meal, so the work of women was an integral part of the

spiritual life of the community. At the end of a day of labor, the daily meal became the central and unifying ritual of the Jesus-community. The work of women was literally holding the church together. The parable of the Great Dinner in Luke 14, to which the most marginalized people were invited, was being fulfilled, along with Deuteronomy 15:4, which promised that in the New Age “there will be no one in need among you.”

**Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11**

Now let’s look at the specific examples Luke includes: Barnabas as a model of what to do, and Ananias and Sapphira as models of what not to do. I believe these people are included because they were among the very few who were wealthy enough to own land. Since Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, the field he owned was probably there. If it would have been near Jerusalem, it would have been retained and used for crops by the community.

The story of the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira for lying shocks us. But if we had lived in that culture, we would understand the necessity of complete truthfulness in these circumstances. Though it was permissible to lie to outsiders, lying was not permitted within the kin-group. Because of the high level of trust involved in a back-and-forth generalized reciprocity, one had to live a transparent life within the group. Sharing possessions demands absolute trust. So, when this couple lies, they betray the entire group. They have effectively made themselves outsiders, and their death is the sign that they are no longer part of the group. Acts 5:11 says that great fear seized the whole church. That was quite a lesson in understanding the high level of commitment demanded within this newly formed kin-group.

This sad story can also be useful for feminists. In the patriarchal society in which the Jerusalem community lived, the only reason Sapphira had to give her consent is that the property they were selling was part of her marriage agreement, called the *ketubah*. Ananias could not legally sell it without her consent. Sapphira submits to her husband and signs over the property. In so doing, she chooses patriarchy over loyalty to her fictive-kin-group of Jesus-believers. Even though this story is tragic, it can be useful for women in coercive marriages who are told to always submit to their husbands. If the gospel trumped marriage in that culture, surely it should in ours as well.

The next time women are mentioned in Acts, we find conflict.

**Acts 5:42-6:6**

*<sup>42</sup>And every day in the temple and at home they [the apostles] did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. <sup>6:1</sup>Now during these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily table service. <sup>2</sup>And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup>while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." <sup>5</sup>What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup>They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

Now that we know something about the culture and social arrangements of first-century Palestine, can we reconstruct the story underneath this brief account? First, we need additional background information. This text has also been variously interpreted. Some conservative interpreters who believe the Lukan community of goods actually happened see this food fight as the beginning of its breakdown. Communal sharing doesn't work because some people just can't appreciate what they've been given. But redaction critics, who think that the community of goods never really happened, have a different theory, which also betrays their sexism. They think Luke is covering up the deep divisions among the Jerusalem community. A disagreement among women, of all things, simply would not have engaged the attention of the entire group and caused such reorganization. A poor-relief committee could have been appointed to take care of the problem. Luke uses the widows' complaint as a smoke screen to cover up the real issues that caused a split between Hebrews and Hellenists.

Yet in ancient literature, where men alone dominate the public sphere, women are never mentioned unless they are exceptional in some way. But, in this instance, women who prepared the daily communal meals eaten in the context of worship were at the heart of the ritual and economic life of the

community. In Acts 6 we have a situation in which something women did has so affected the Jesus-community that even the apostles are called in and the whole community is somehow restructured.

Can we come up with any other theories, given what we know about ancient community structures? Here are a few more clues.

1. Verse 42: the apostles' time is entirely taken up with teaching and preaching, both in the temple and at home. Therefore, women must be managing the households as they would naturally do in that culture.

2. The "Hebrews" refer to Jews who spoke Aramaic but probably also knew some Greek. This would include the women disciples who followed Jesus from Galilee and were present at his crucifixion and resurrection. The "Hellenists" were Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora and who spoke only Greek.

3. In the ancient world, since most people were married, "widow" could mean any woman unattached to a man. Widows could be poor or not-so-poor. But in this case, no widow would have been in need because Acts 4:34 said that none were in need.

4. In Acts 6:1, the Greek word usually translated "distribution" is actually "*diakonia*," which means service. In the context of food and meals, this term can only mean serving food at tables.

5. Acts 2:46 says that the community ate together by households every day in a sacred, or quasi-sacred, communal meal. Widows therefore did not live in their own little hovels and expect daily "meals on wheels."

6. In this honor/shame society with fairly rigid gender roles, honor for a woman means remaining sexually pure and doing women's work well. Doing things outside traditional gender roles would not be honorable for a woman.

*[During this presentation, women organized themselves into groups of four or five to "do their own theology." How would they now interpret this text in light of the larger, first-century context of a community of goods? Many suggestions and insights were reported.]*

I conclude that the real problem here was neither a deeper, male-oriented rift within the community nor a poor-relief issue of destitute widows being ignored at the food pantry or soup kitchen. Rather, it was Hellenist

women's honor that was being neglected. If women were doing their women's work of meal preparation and serving, a daily ritual that now held deep sacramental overtones and lay at the heart of their common life, Hebrew women may have taken those female roles that held the most honor. Especially if those Hebrew women included the Galilean disciples who had traveled with Jesus and provided for him and his larger "fictive-kin group." Such women may have been lighting the candles, presiding over the meals, and serving the food, leaving the less visible tasks, such as tedious food preparation and clean-up, to the Hellenist women. Add to these tensions the language barrier; the Aramaic-speaking women may have deliberately (or unconsciously) ignored or put down the Greek-only speakers.

The solution, arrived at through a typical Greco-Roman mixture of top-down and democratic processes, was that seven *men* should take over meal management. What can this mean, given defined gender roles in that society? I suggest it may be one of two options. First, that these men were all Hellenist shows a clear attempt at equality. If the honor of Hellenist women was neglected, their own Greek-speaking people should help to set things right and maintain equality. Further, perhaps the community reviewed Jesus' strong emphasis on role reversals and the greater serving the lesser (see Jesus' words on this in Luke 22:24-27, deliberately placed in the context of his last meal). Perhaps men were chosen to actually reverse roles and do women's work, which in that culture always had lesser status than men's work.

On the other hand, I am enough of a realist to suspect that men were chosen, not to actually *do* women's work but to *oversee* the communal meals. They became the representatives in the public sphere of communal life to manage what was going on in the private sphere and to make sure women received equal honor for women's work. We have no idea whether they actually did this work or not, since two of them, Stephen and Philip, immediately take up the tasks of teaching, preaching, and praying, which the Galilean apostles were reserving for themselves (cf. Acts 6:2-4 with 6:8-8:40).

What can we as believers draw from these texts for our current cultural situations? From this study, we can see that hospitality in the home blurs into church-community hospitality. We can't go back to the community of goods in this ancient agrarian society, but I'd like to see our churches do more to integrate the Table of the Lord in the upstairs sanctuary with the Sunday

potluck tables in the church basement, so that the work of women – mostly women, anyway – is seen as sacramental. I would like to see weekly soup suppers in churches to which anyone in the neighborhood is invited, especially the poor, and which also has a bread breaking ritual and a wine or juice sharing ritual as part of the meal.

But there are many other possibilities or combinations. We can use meals as a great opportunity both to welcome people in, feed the hungry, and celebrate the risen Christ at the same time. I'd like lots of people to say, "If I know anything about anything, that church means Friendly People, and Friendly People means Company, and Company means Food and Listening to me talking . . . and such like." Maybe they'll like it so much they'll get stuck in the doorway and never want to leave!

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Winnie the Pooh excerpt from A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* [1926], reprint (New York: American Book - Stratford Press, 1961).