

The book I read to our children a few minutes ago has almost as few words as our reading from Proverbs. But despite how brief that story is, it goes deep. What I loved most about it the first time I read it was that it shows the power of an invitation. The boy in the story started out lonely, but he felt his life change when he was invited to the party. And that change was not just a momentary relief of his loneliness while he partied with the animals. The power of that invitation overflowed from the party and into his everyday life. When he returned home, he had a story to share with the other kids. The book ends with the other kids crowded around the boy, listening to his story. He started out lonely, but now he's surrounded by people. We're left to imagine what comes next: maybe he's accepted into the group of kids in a way he wasn't before. Maybe he'll have friends from now on. Maybe his life will be better – just because of that one night out.¹

This Tuesday evening we will be hosting a visit from a couple of Lutherans from Guatemala, including their denomination's president. They'll also visit our Women's Bible Study on Wednesday morning. Pastor Karen and Diego will share another story about the power of an invitation. They'll tell us about a women's education center their church supports, Casa Milagro – which means "Miracle House".

"Casa Milagro was founded with the aim of helping people who are forgotten, who are considered unimportant, so that they also have access to personal growth and development."² Women in Guatemala are usually told that they can't do things. If a poor family has money to educate their children, it goes to the boys first. But at Casa Milagro, women are educated and invited to discover their own gifts and purpose.

The power of that invitation to come and learn and discover gifts – that's more than an opportunity for individual women to get an education and

¹ Daniel Miyares, *Night Out*, (New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2018).

² This quote and the following stories are from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's video, "Education opens doors for young women in Guatemala," 11 June 2019. https://youtu.be/JhP_XI4KeA8 Accessed 31 August 2019.

develop their own talents. It's more even than a drive for equality between genders. It's an invitation to come and learn whose power overflows into the family and the community.

For example, take the story of Floridalma, a student at Casa Milagro. She said: "In my community there are no roads at all, no health center. When I graduate, I'll open my own clinic." Her clinic and her skills will be life-changing for the people in her community, who will be able to receive medical care without having to travel. Women at the center also learn how to sew, how to bake, how to do basic masonry work – all skills that can have a big impact on their whole community as well as bringing an income for the young woman and her family. In fact, research shows that educating women can have a huge impact on the well-being of a country both socially and economically. The World Bank economist Lawrence Summers once wrote that "investment in the education of girls may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world."³

The power of this invitation can affect the way women are seen in a community. When these young women come back able to lay brick and open a bakery, the whole community learns to see that women can do more, can start businesses, can be leaders. It kicks off a change in assumptions about a women's place in society which will have a big affect on the next generation.

The power of this invitation may even overflow from the community to other nations. The better able families are to keep themselves safe and out of poverty, the less likely they are to feel they need to immigrate or seek refuge somewhere else. Educating and training another half of the population means bringing more stability, decreasing the need to immigrate, and so affecting a big political issue that most of us feel we have no control over.

These kinds of stories remind us of the power of an invitation: an invitation to a party, to an education, to a community. An invitation to a person who is usually forgotten, left out, considered unimportant, or purposefully outcast – that kind of invitation can change not only a moment of that person's life, but

3 Lawrence H. Summers, forward to *Women's Education in Developing Countries*, ed. Elizabeth M. King and M. Anne Hill, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. v. See also "Socioeconomic impact of female education" on Wikipedia.

it can overflow into other parts of their lives, into their family and community, into other parts of the world.

I have to think that big picture is what Jesus had in mind when he told the person who had invited him to dinner: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” I mean, how rude is it to tell your host how to be a good host? He had to have a good reason to do that.

Plus, inviting those who weren’t usually invited was a centerpiece of Jesus’s ministry. He was constantly touching the untouchable, loving the unlovable, forgiving the unforgivable, healing the un-healable. And in so many stories Jesus’s brief, welcoming encounter with someone seemed to change their entire life. A single person was important enough to Jesus to be worth his time and even breaking social norms, but he also knew that inviting those usually not invited could impact our world by bringing a change to the usual way of things.

Just think of Mary Magdalene: according to the Gospel of Luke, she was possessed by seven demons (Luke 8:2). Luke doesn’t tell us how this affected her life, but I imagine people avoiding her, ridiculing her, treating her like a weirdo. Her life could have been one of loneliness. But Jesus saw her as the full person she was, reached out to her, and healed her. That changed her whole life. She was given a new purpose: following Jesus and supporting his ministry. She was the only person who was there at the empty tomb in all four gospels. She went on to share the story of Jesus with many others, becoming a leader in the early church – the Church which has now spread around the world and changed billions of lives over the last 2,000 years.

Our invitation and welcome to others can have that kind of healing affect, too. I see that power when our congregation welcomes new visitors. I see it when we take care of people who are ill or who can’t make it to church anymore. I see it when churches reach out to actively invite and welcome those who can’t usually find a place in a church: people who look different, are from somewhere different, love someone different, or have different

abilities. When we show hospitality to the people who need it most, we are living out Jesus's welcoming, invitational power in our own lives. The hospitality we show to one person can overflow from that moment into the rest of their day, maybe the rest of their lives, and maybe even into the community around them.

Today's reading from Hebrews reminds us that the power of invitation goes both ways. It says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Angels are messengers from God, beings who are sent to give us a good word. When we invite and welcome others – especially those like the people Jesus welcomed; those who are forgotten, those who are left out, those considered unimportant, those purposefully outcast – God might send us a message through them.

Jesus reminds us in the Gospel of Matthew: "What you did for the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). So when we show hospitality to others, especially those most in need of it, we are behaving like Christ for them; but also, when we show this radical hospitality, Christ promises to appear to us in them. This two-way holy giving is one of the amazing ways that God renews us as we serve God and neighbor; it is one of God's amazing gifts of grace.