

“The Ties that Bind”  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs  
September 1, 2013

**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely....When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

Judith Dunnington Peabody, a New York socialite, was highlighted in an op-ed column in 2010, shortly following her death at the age of 80. Born in 1930, she lived in an era in which her money and her family’s money opened doors, and also created certain expectations for her life. The death of such a woman would have gained her a prominent obituary, certainly, but Judith Peabody’s life was not highlighted because of the money that she possessed. Instead, Peabody’s life was highlighted because of what she did with her money, and the ways that her actions defied the expectations of her social circle. At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, in 1985, for example, she began serving area hospitals, helping those who were suffering from the disease, never failing to hold their hands. This was a time when AIDS was considered a despicable plague, and everyone believed the rumor that it could be spread just by casual contact. Peabody didn’t care. She helped people who were suffering. And, as the op-ed columnist says, “Thanks to Peabody’s prominence, her example had a discernible effect in beating back

ignorance and fear in New York.”<sup>1</sup> By the time of her AIDS work, Peabody had already made a habit of working in places that were not considered acceptable for a person in the upper-echelon of society. Her husband tells the story of having picked her up for one of their first dates, when she was 20 years old, at a youth center for delinquents where she was volunteering. He recalls that she said, “Please don’t tell my mother. She thinks I’m having French lessons.”<sup>2</sup> Peabody continued her work of compassion in the less-reputable sections of New York throughout the rest of her life. And, as has been pointed out by others writing about Peabody, she was one who seemed to “keenly understand Jesus’ instructions about whom to invite to one’s table”<sup>3</sup> – she once surprised the doorman of her apartment building by inviting the Harlem youth gang she was working with to dinner at her home.

### **Jesus’s instructions**

Peabody’s story cannot help but recall that meal which the Gospel of Luke recounts, when Jesus boldly instructs his host not to invite those who he thinks will be strategically advantageous for him, but to invite guests from the streets – the poor, crippled, lame, and blind – those who, especially in that society, would be absolutely unheard of for him to have in his home, who were the lowest of society, and unclean.

Meals have always held a special function for people all over the world, in any time. In Jesus’ culture especially, sharing food and offering hospitality were ways of creating and demonstrating strong ties and obligations among people.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus showed his obligations to God’s people by eating meals with them, even without his own table at which to host. He accepted invitations, and went so far as to

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<sup>1</sup> “Angels in America.” Frank Rich. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/opinion/15rich.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Judith Peabody, Socialite and Volunteer, Dies at 80.” Bruce Weber  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/27/nyregion/27peabody.html>

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Matthews Huey, <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-1-2013.html>

invite himself into other people's home, as in the case of Zaccheus, and demonstrated to the community exactly to whom he was bound – not only the prominent members of society, but people of all classes and conditions – prostitutes, tax collectors, widows, children, the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. These meals were not just meaningless ways to satisfy hunger. *These* meals, where Jesus entered the homes, not just of the wealthy and influential, but of poor sinners, looked down on by others – these meals were a way of showing the world that he was bound not to *one* group, but to all. God provides for *everyone*, and especially cares for those who are most in need, and yes, who are most “sinful.” Jesus' attendance at the tables of those considered undesirable underscored that his love was for all, that no one was beneath showing charity, and that no one was above receiving it. These were not the people with whom a political conqueror should have been associating. But these *were* people with whom the Son the God, the teacher and example to all who try to follow God's will to love God with all your heart, soul, body, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself, should have been associating, should have been sitting down to meals with, creating and demonstrating strong ties in communion with one another.

When we read the gospel to try to find God's will for our lives, I think the hardest part for most of us is actually accepting what we read. This passage is a great example.

We can accept that *Jesus* was the kind of guy who regularly sat down with people of ill repute, a guy who had no home, whose life was devoted to exposing hypocrisies and teaching people about God's love, and who faced without fear the consequences that came from angering powerful people. But that's Jesus. That's why he was here, right?

There are some problems when we *truly* try to take Jesus as an example for our own lives. Leave our families? Live without a place to lay our heads at night? Associate with people

we barely know? Give up *all* our possessions? There are some legitimate practical problems with living that life ourselves.

How do we deal with that?

We don't have to stop associating with anyone with whom we're comfortable – as Jesus says, friends, relatives, or neighbors. What Jesus asks of us is to step beyond the advantageous. Share with those who can never repay you; love those who don't love you back; be Christ-like with *everyone*, not just with your friends. Why? Because all people are like you – people who need ties with others, people who are God's children, people with whom we can work to grow God's love in the world. Because of our fear, we keep our hospitality “circulating among our own ‘kind’ of people, or at least those we can feel comfortable around.”<sup>4</sup> But try as you might, you will never meet someone who is totally unlike you. Jesus asks us to change because we are wrong. God's love is not reserved for a chosen group, but is given freely to all, because all need it. Our love is not more valuable than God's; it isn't more privileged. So Jesus tells us that in order to live out God's will we must love the world. We have to expand our boundaries. *That's* how we achieve honor in the world – not by working for worldly recognition, but by living out God's love. The ties that we should be creating in this world are not those that end when our earthly life ends. Just like the money and wealth that we cannot take with us, these networks will not make us powerful in heaven. The ties that we should be creating are those that will build the relationships that God values – relationships that shows God's love to *all*.

Judith Peabody certainly *had* earthly connections that benefited her, and also benefited her ministry to others. But it was the *other* ties that made a difference. As Professor Lisa Davison says, “power and wealth are morally neutral, but ‘how one uses these privileges that matters

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<sup>4</sup> Huey, <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-1-2013.html>

most to God’ (Davison, *New Proclamation Year C 2010*).”<sup>5</sup> “Judith Peabody knew “what it means to love strangers – not from afar, but sitting right down, next to them.”<sup>6</sup>

“Why was she so unusual? Maybe it was because those she served were so unlike her, so far away from her own life setting, at least in outward ways, like privilege, class, and wealth. She did not shy away from ‘areas where polite society did not go.’”<sup>7</sup>

As I was reading about Judith Peabody, I was reminded about the ways that my own grandmother had embodied these values. I’ve told you all about my mother’s side of the family, and my grandfather who flew a plane over The Hump in World War II. My father’s side of the family has some good stories, too. My father’s dad was a Chaplain in the Army during WWII, who surprised others by doing everything his troops did even though he didn’t have to, including jumping out of planes with the para-trooper unit. His wife, Edna Raley, my grandmother, exemplified the same values, which they both took from their faith and following of Christ. As a Chaplain’s wife, my grandmother was fully involved in the churches which my grandfather served after the war. Most of her service, though, was not really “typical” for what would have been expected. To give just one example out of many – when they were stationed in Okinawa in 1954, she was one of the only people who left the base and went into the village, not just once, but often enough to begin and direct a choir for the village boys. In 1954, only 9 years after the war with Japan, going into a Japanese village at all was a brave thing to do. Throughout her life, from a young girl to an old age, my grandmother served those to whom Christ called her. She may have been uncomfortable with a great number of the people she served, but she invited them into her life all the same, serving them in the spirit of Jesus Christ her Lord.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-1-2013.html>  
<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-1-2013.html>  
<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-1-2013.html>

### **What does it mean for us?**

What do these possibly impractical words of Jesus mean for us? How do we respond? Should we invite strange unknown people into homes?

Well, no, I wouldn't necessarily recommend that. Not *unknown* people. Invite people whom you have *come* to know by working with them. Serve *with* people with whom you might be uncomfortable, and invite them to serve with you. And also spend time with people like yourself, strengthening the ties of love and friendship over a dinner table. Meals are important, and the meals that we share at FCC are important ways to share God's love – it's why we do Chat n Coffee, and Dinners for 8, and Young Adults Fellowship over lunch every Sunday.

Jesus tells us to invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. The fact is that we are all disabled or impoverished in some way or another. We all have some brokenness within us. It's because of our own broken parts that we can recognize them others. Don't ignore those parts, only thinking about the virtues of others and how those virtues can benefit you. Invite others in with compassion, recognizing the brokenness that connects you to others.

We should not *stop* having meals among one another. But let us always be trying to expand that circle to find others about whom we can learn in mutual spirit of Christ's love and compassion. Who else can you invite to a meal, to strengthen the ties of God's love? Who else can you *go* to, to be with them in recognition of the mutual brokenness, to be with them to share a spirit of compassion and love, binding you to together in recognition of God's great grace that has blessed you both?

**I'm challenging myself and all of you** to practice what Jesus asks of us in this Gospel reading. I hope the changes we make are ongoing, but they begin with a single step. So here we go:

I've written a sentence on a slip of paper. It says: "I treated someone I wasn't comfortable around to a meal, and shared it with them, because they needed me to be the voice of God's love."

I'm going to seal this envelope, and when I preach again on Oct 6, I'm going to open it in front of the congregation. By then, the statement will be true, and I'll tell you the story about it.

I'd like each of you to think about a similar statement that *you* could try to make true. It should be something that you will have done by this time next month that will have shown God's love to someone outside your comfort zone. Maybe it's buying McDonalds gift cards and giving them to someone in need, and offering to share that meal with that person. Or maybe it's finding an hour each week to volunteer at Ecumenical Social Ministries, or Catholic Charities, and getting to know people. Maybe it's having brunch/lunch today with someone here you don't know yet. What will do you by this time next month?

Don't ignore opportunities to associate with others with whom you're not yet comfortable, whether that's a poor person or a rich person. You will be surprised by what you learn about them. No matter who you are, there are people with whom you are uncomfortable, people with whom it feels strange to be around. But Jesus tells us that honor in the kingdom of God comes from being with the *whole* people of God, not just the ones we can get something from. Jesus tells us to invite into our lives the people whom our culture does not recognize as acceptable "society" companions. Everyone is welcome here, in this building, at this table, at this meal. Is everyone welcome into *your* life, as well?