



WEEK 4: MAKING ROOM FOR OTHERS

The first two years of my time at university were spent living at Knox College – an all-male Presbyterian hall of residence in Dunedin. Knox was modelled on the college system of the great British universities and purported to offer much more than that of a hostel, which is why most students stayed there for multiple years of their university careers. Tutorials, chapel services, cultural and sporting events – these were all features of Knox life.

The imposing red brick building stands like an English castle on a hill in Dunedin North. Through the main doors is an ornate staircase, extending up several floors through the turret at the center of the building.

In particular, dining at Knox was quite the experience. The food at Knox was outstanding and nothing like the slop most students complain about from their university days. Mrs. Brown, the Matron, was a kindly woman, with a knack of providing consistently high quality meals as well as relating to us in a winsome and motherly way. She was gold.

The dining room (known as The Great Hall) was an architectural masterpiece, complete with large stained glass windows and chandeliers. At one end of the dining room was an elevated table around which the Master (head of the College) and the Fellows of the Upper Common Room (young scholars and tutors) sat. Behind them sat an impressive stag head on the wall.

During weeknights, Knox residents were required to wear a collared shirt, tie, and jacket to dinner. Never mind what you wore on the bottom half, with guys frequently turning up in shorts or jeans, and sandals. Of the regular meals, Sunday lunch was the most formal of occasions. All residents were expected to wear a suit, and the college was generally in full attendance.

It was the custom of the Master and the Upper Common Room members to always be last to enter the Great Hall. Everyone stood and then the Master said grace – in Latin.

Eating at Knox was a world away from what I experienced at Prem Dan in Kolkata, India, years later.

Like so many people from around the world, my daughter and I found ourselves volunteering at one of the Missionaries of Charity homes for a few days.

When the Master in Jesus’s Parable of the Great Banquet commanded his servant to go out and invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” to his feast, that’s exactly what Mother Teresa and her fellow nuns have done.

Our daily routine as volunteers was simple, yet profound. We gathered at the Mother House at 6.00am for Mass with the sisters. Then a simple breakfast of bread, bananas, and chai, followed by a prayer. Catching crowded buses, we took off to serve in the various homes run by the order.

Prem Dan (meaning “a gift of love”) is a home for those men and women who are struggling with major health issues - folk who likely would have already died on the streets of Kolkata, if not for the hospitality of the sisters.

Here I found myself, sweating profusely in the humid heat, washing laundry, and serving and feeding men who were the very poorest of the poor – face-to-face with people whose physical and emotional needs were so starkly visible.

I tried to remind myself that each person I was serving had a story, a life prior to these last months and years. Communication was difficult – as most didn’t speak a word of English and I certainly didn’t speak Hindi. A smile here, an acknowledgement there, an offer of help. It wasn’t very much at all – but this was all I had to offer in the face of such overwhelming need. I recalled the words of Jesus, “*Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me.*”

- Share any thoughts or insights you have from this story.
- Share what happened in your Challenge for the Week.

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- In your work, have you encountered any “Mrs. Brown’s”? What was it about the person that inspired or impressed you? Do you think such people are just naturally gifted, or have they learnt the art of being such warm hosts?

Luke 14:1-24 The Parable of the Great Banquet

Lectio Divina (divine reading) is an ancient practice of reading Scripture in a way that helps us to hear what the Spirit might be saying to us – individually and as a group. As a form of Lectio Divina, have one person in your group read the story slowly, three times – with a break for reflection between each reading.

First reading: familiarize yourself with the overall story. Let it wash over you.

Second reading: look for a word or a phrase that particularly sticks out to you.

Speak out this word or phrase during the time of reflection following the reading. (Don’t attempt to explain why you have chosen the particular phrase – simply voice it.)

Third reading: ask yourself “What most impacts/speaks to you in this story?”

Share your response during the time of reflection following the reading. Again, don’t explain why – simply voice it.

Now let’s look at the passage a little more closely.

Setting the scene

1. Jewish culture had very rigid rules – including ones around who you should and shouldn’t dine with. Jesus seems to have regularly disregarded these social rules, which of course made those who viewed them important – particularly the religious leaders – hostile toward him. According to them, Jesus was hanging around with the wrong type of people.

2. Here we find Jesus invited to a “society meal”, hosted by a leading Pharisee and likely attended by a bunch of other important folk. It’s unclear whether the person with dropsy (swelling of the body) was a fellow guest or someone uninvited who came to see Jesus while he was dining.

3. There was a lot of prestige involved in being seated close to the host at a meal like this, and clearly there has been some jostling for position between the guests.

Discuss

- Why do you think the other guests “were keeping a close eye on (Jesus)” at the meal?
- What are some of the subtle (and not so subtle) games you have seen played by people to reinforce their social, positional, or economic status?
- How do you see some of these games played out in your workplace and/or industry?
- Share any challenges you have in being “fully present” to people in your company – rather than caught up in your own needs, thoughts or workload. To help, you may like to think of a particular work function you’ve been at (or hosted) recently. To what degree were you “other-focused”? Were you pre-occupied by your own “stuff” (e.g. the need to impress others, mind on other things, avoidance of certain people, disinterest in engaging, too busy on your smartphone etc.)? If so, in what ways was it a barrier to being fully present?
- The Parable of the Great Dinner seems to have two levels of meaning to it. The first one is an allusion to an invitation to the Great Banquet at the end of the age. Why do you think it’s so often those of us who have the least going for them in this life who are most responsive to Jesus’ invitation?
- The second layer of meaning is a much more literal interpretation. Eugene Peterson puts verse 13 this way, “*Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks.*” Have you ever felt like a “misfit”? Why? Can you think of particular people in your world –workplace, neighborhood, church etc. – who may feel they are “misfits”?
- What do you think are some of the barriers or challenges to eating with those who are “strangers” to you? Think of the challenges for both you and them.

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- In what ways can you be more “present” to the needs of your guests? Can doing so sometimes get in the way of undertaking your core role?

Making room for others

Hospitality is about making space for others. Not just at our meal tables, but in the whole of our lives – including our places of work. Inviting people into not only our homes, but also our hearts.

To do this, we need to be “fully present”. That is, our whole attention has to be given to them. Yet too often we are distracted by our own stuff, our own needs, our own agenda.

True hospitality is not about us. It is about “the other” – the one we are making space for. This requires humility and “other-centeredness”.

I love the metaphor of an embrace that the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf uses in his book *Exclusion & Embrace*, to describe what welcoming others into our space is about. Volf notes that there are four distinct movements to an embrace:

The opening of the arms

“Open arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in.” They are an invitation.

The waiting

“The other person cannot be coerced or manipulated into an embrace.”

The invitation must be reciprocated. Waiting gives opportunity for the other person to choose whether or not they wish to respond.

The closing of the arms

The actual embrace is, of course, the goal. But “it takes two pairs of arms for one embrace”. Each must enter the other’s space and feel the other’s presence. To do so, “a soft touch is necessary” – so as not to crush the other.

The opening of the arms again

Releasing the other person is the last movement – freeing them to be the person they are, rather than the person we want them to be.

Volf suggests that a true embrace cannot leave either person unchanged. This was certainly my experience at Prem Dan. And it was also the strongest memory of have of Mrs. Brown – the matron at Knox College.

“The sign that we are practicing the presence of people is that we ... find ourselves seeing things about them that we never noticed before, understanding them from the inside out, tenderly identifying with their weaknesses, and marveling at their larger-than-lifeness.” Mike Mason

Discuss

- What element of the embrace metaphor is most helpful for you?
- What are some ways we can “create space for others” in our workplaces?
- Can you think of any acts of hospitality you have given, received, or observed, where there has been coercion or manipulation? What was the effect?
- How can our hospitality (welcoming the stranger) be empowering and give dignity, rather than coercive or patronizing?
- Reflect on the power dynamics in your workplace. How could some of this be dissipated, so that generous hospitality was able to flourish and empower?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- What, if any, power dynamics have you observed in your workplace – either between guests, or between staff, or between guests and staff? What role, if any, do you feel you could play to subvert these power or status games?

Prayer

Here’s the prayer offered each morning by the volunteers at the Missionaries of Charity:

Dear Lord, the great healer; we kneel before You

Since every good and perfect gift must come from You, we pray:

Give skill to our hands

Clear vision to our minds

Kindness and meekness to our hearts

Give us singleness of purpose

Strength to lift up part of the burden of our suffering fellow men and women

And a true realization of the privilege that is ours.

Take from our hearts all guile and worldliness, that with the simple faith of a child, we may rely on You. Amen.

“A good host is not only able to receive his guests with honor and offer them all the care they need but also to let them go when their time to leave has come.” Henri Nouwen

Challenge for the week!

The challenge this week is to seek to “make room for” and be “fully present” to someone at work. Plan some time with them so that you can chat, particularly seeking to open your heart and hear their story and how things are for them. Ask God to give you ears to hear what is really happening for them – their hopes, fears, dreams, disappointments, and struggles.

You may like to do this through inviting the person out for coffee, or to a ballgame – or maybe just lingering a little longer in the staffroom. Whatever context is appropriate and unthreatening for the person and you.

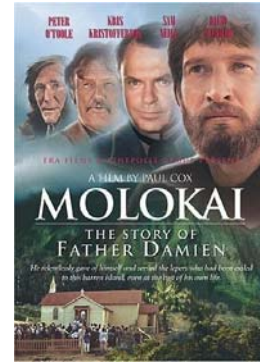
Spend some time praying for the person in the day or two after you’ve met with them.

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

Molokai: the story of Father Damian (1999) 113 minutes

Summary: Based on the true story of a Belgian priest who volunteered to minister to the leper colony on the remote Hawaiian island of Molokai. For sixteen years Father Damian helped transform a despairing, suffering, and chaotic settlement into a place of hope, beauty, and compassion. His generous hospitality resulted in Damian eventually contracting leprosy himself. He died in 1888.

Molokai explores a number of themes around physical and social suffering, prejudice and fear, compassion and hope.



Some questions that may help in your reflections and/or discussion are:

- The bishop’s final instruction to Father Damian before he departs for Molokai is “Remember – you are not to touch anyone...” What is the role of human touch in offering generous hospitality? What part did this play in Damian’s care of the people of Molokai? What difference did his disregard for the bishop’s advice make? And what was the cost?
- Can you recall an incident in the gospels where Jesus also took a risk with a person with leprosy? What happened?
- What are the various ways Damian offered generous hospitality to the people of Molokai?
- In what way did the chapel become a house of hospitality? How did this happen?
- Discuss the dynamics between Damian and his religious superiors, and the political authorities. What do you think was driving most of the tension?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- Are there any risks to your health or safety in your work? How do you feel about them and does or should this affect the way you approach your role and relate to guests?

Read Luke 14:1-24 (The Parable of the Great Banquet).

- How do you think Damian would have understood this?