

# The Hospitality of God

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Welcome everyone, once again, to worship. Whether you're here in the sanctuary or following online, everyone is welcome here.

You know, I realize that it's Lent, you know. I know that we're in the third Sunday of Lent, so it's beginning to sink in and take hold. But what I didn't realize, especially as I began preparing to preach this morning, is that the sermon that I was going to preach today was going to be so heavily about sin. The problem of excess.

Excess. I'm talking about that over-consumption that we partake in through the days and weeks of our lives. That consumptive sin of lust or greed or gluttony...I didn't know it was going to be about those things.

I also didn't know it was going to be about sins of the ego. The problem of an overly developed sense of self, that sense of pride that goes too far. Or envy. Or wrath. I didn't know my sermon was going to be about these things. And yet, as the week went on, I began to realize these are some important things to talk about in these days. Important because excess brings distortions, pains, sufferings between people. I mean, think about the war in Ukraine: the excess of ego that is involved, their pride, and envy, and wrath. Think about the distortions that this sort of living in excess brings between people and creation, about global warming.

Excess, however you want to define it, draws us, lures us away from a community that God wants us to live in. Excess lures us away from God's invitation to live in a community and listen carefully. To live in a community where less is more and everyone has enough. *Less is more, and everyone has enough.* Say that with me once, because we're going to come back to it over and over again: less is more, and everyone has enough.

I'm turning to our gospel reading right away today because Jesus brings out two examples right there. Boom! Right at the beginning of the reading, two examples of excess and the pain and suffering that they bring.

The first is a story: Jesus gives a little example about Galileans, who presumably are murdered and then whose blood Pilate mingles with the sacrifices they were offering. This is a human disaster on an enormous level, brought on by Pilate's lust for power and control and his willingness to make an example out of some people to maintain that power and control.

Jesus is quick to point out that the death of these Galileans is not a punishment for their sinfulness. Now, there is a thread within scripture that says that disasters or calamities that befall you are a result of your own sin, but Jesus says, *No, no, no. That's not what's going on here.*

Here's the second example: A tower in Jerusalem called Siloam falls on 18 people. Think about that. We might go, *Oh, how terrible unlucky*, but we know something about construction disasters, don't we? They're brought on by greed, cutting corners, taking a chance with inferior materials. Construction

disasters brought on by greed and the desire for more profit. Jesus says, *Do you think that this tower fell on them because they're sinners? No! This is not a punishment for what they did. No, Jesus says, I tell you these two things, these two examples, as a warning to take stock. To change course, to repent before it's too late, before you are sucked into a way of living that brings disaster. Not just upon you, but upon the community in which you live. Change course before it's too late. Change course to a life together where less is more, and everyone has enough.*

You don't have to go back to stories from the New Testament to experience these kinds of disasters. Whether it's something as great as a tower falling on people or something, or as simple as a family being torn apart by excess. A mom had three daughters and lived alone in a house that her daughters had grown up in. Their father had died years before, and then she died, and I was called over to the house. The three daughters had gathered from different parts of the country and called to the house to do some funeral planning. As I walked in the front doors, some friends were there fixing food and being reunited with the daughters that had grown. And they said, *Oh, the kids are in the back in mom's room.*

I had never been there, so I walked down the hall and tried to find my way. There was this huge room there: bed and dressers and beautiful art on the walls, and the hugest closet I had ever seen in my life. And from this huge, enormous closet came shouts and yelling, because the three daughters were fighting over all the stuff in that closet. Shoes! More shoes than I'd ever laid eyes on, even those shoes that have the red on the bottom

that people think are really cool. And scarves and dresses and sweaters and pants and boxes of the stuff that were loaded behind the clothes that were hanging. There's so much stuff. And they were yelling at each other and wanted it all for themselves. I waved and said, *I'm here. I'll wait.*

I sat down on the bed and looked over on the dresser. There were three beautiful necklaces hanging from the little knobs on the dresser, each with a little tag on them. On each tag was the daughter's name. I wondered if her three daughters had even noticed

Isaiah invites us out of that kind of closet of excess to a table where less is more, and everyone has enough. Isaiah says, *Come to the waters and you—that have no money—come, buy, and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Less is more and everyone has enough. Why do you invest yourself, Isaiah says, why do you put your energy in all these things that do not satisfy? Why do you labor for things that are really not with any worth to them?*

It's the question Isaiah asks: *Why do we not change course? Why do we not repent? Why are we so lured in by all this stuff?* Isaiah doesn't give answer. He simply says, *Listen carefully, folks. Listen to what is really good, and that's an everlasting relationship of love that God has for you, and desires to cultivate around tables and fonts. Repent, Isaiah says, Change course. Receive this invitation to love. An invitation to a table where once again, less is more and everyone has enough. An invitation to a place and a time and event where we can set aside our excess. Where we can begin to live into a wider world*

*where everything is grace, all is a gift, and everyone gets to share in the amazing abundance and hospitality of God. It's truly a beautiful place to hang out, this place that lacks excess.*

I was thinking about my first experience of this kind of hospitality, and it brought me back to a night where I should have been at a blowout birthday pizza party. I should have been there. I was invited and I had been told all about it by one of my snooty friends in the fourth grade. *It's going to be awesome!* he said. *So much pizza, so much really good cake, and balloons for everyone to take home* (which for a fourth grader was pretty cool). I should have been at that place: Shakey's Pizza Parlor in downtown Astoria.

Instead, my mom brought me and my little sister to something that was new, something that I knew I was going to dread. It was the very first Lenten soup supper at my home church. When I walked in, what did I find on the table in the fellowship hall? A single pot of soup and a few really timid looking loaves of bread. My eyes flashed to Shakey's and all the pizza I was missing. *What?* I couldn't imagine it; this disappointment was one of the first great ones of my life. (Most of the rest of them...well, I'll talk about those in another sermon). But here it had to do with food. I sulked. I grabbed my really thin looking soup and my slice of bread that had just two little butters spread over it and went and sat in the corner.

All of a sudden something happened. There was talking around me at those tables. Not the kind of talking that would have been happening at Shakey's like, *Ooh, I got you the better present. Oh, your present, it's nothing.* Not that kind of talking.

People actually talking to one another and laughing and singing. People inviting me over—a fourth grader—calling me by name. *Chuck, come on over, sit with us!* Older folks in the congregation asking me how my day was. I was amazed they actually knew my name.

Looking back on it, it's the first in my life where my lust for pizza and cake and balloons and excess bumped up against a party where less is more, and everyone has enough. A true community. Somehow living that way together, distortions between people are lessened. And distortions between people and creation are lessened because we had encountered and invested ourselves in repentance and a course change.

Which brings me back to the gospel and that parable that Jonathan referenced, the parable of the fig tree. A man had planted this tree in his garden. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. Three years in a row he had done this. Finally, out of exasperation, he says to the gardener, *Cut it down. It's wasting the soil. Let's plant something productive here.* And the gardener—God bless him—says, *Well, give it one more year. Let's tend to it. Let's put manure on it. Let's dig around it and see what happens.*

I don't know if you know, but this isn't a metaphor for our spiritual life. This is not an abstract problem. In Jesus' day, there had been an ongoing shift from farming for the self and the village to people losing their farms because of indebtedness. People being gathered together by large—I'm going to call them corporate—farmers or large wealthy families where people began to labor for others instead of themselves. Figs were a local

staple crop, meant to feed the self and the community. They were not a successful cash crop for a large corporate farm. What the elite corporate farmers wanted was to shift the crops from figs to olives and grapes and wheat and such. Crops that they could sell in the wider Mediterranean. It was more lucrative. Why? Because of greed. Because of lust for profit, the few killed the tree.

The rebuke of the tree in Jesus' story is a rebuke of a system of greed and lust for profit, a rebuke of excess. *Dig around it, put manure on it, tend to it*, the gardener says. That suggestion is an act of repentance: changing course and investment in—say it with me—**less is more and everyone has enough**. To feed the local community is a Lenten thing.

The three daughters came to the funeral, each wearing a necklace. I looked closely; they had taken their name tags off. At the funeral reception we talked. They said they had finally come to their senses and repented. They had boxed up that huge closet of clothes and shoes with the red bottoms on them and scarves and sweaters, and they gave them away to a shelter for women and children. Heal some of the distortion in that community.

And so I ask each of us this: what is *our* less is more and everyone has enough?