

SERMON: “RADICAL HOSPITALITY: GREETING THE CHRIST IN ALL YOU MEET. Matthew 10:40-11:1

There is a wonderful Shaker tradition of greeting that says, “The Christ in Me meets the Christ in you”. There is a high standard of radical hospitality in those words. At the heart of the Christian faith is the call for hospitality: the ministry of welcoming friend and stranger into your hearts and then into the physical spaces of your lives.

This call from Christ is about as radical as “Love your enemies” because it calls for us to cross personal boundaries, suspend judgments, shake up comfort zones, and often to go “an extra mile” to extend a genuine welcome to others.

I’m back to rereading “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” and have a new challenge for you as well. This conference I picked up a small book that is meant to be a five week daily devotional to explore what those five practices might look like in our Congregation. For those who attended the winter planning retreat or have good memories, the first of these practices is Radical Hospitality – not just a friendly handshake or a sign that says all are welcome, but rather to think about the core of reaching out beyond are small circles of family, friends, church, or community to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they can discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.

This morning’s scripture is the conclusion of a section of Matthew that concentrates on Jesus’ instructions to his disciples. It begins to address what will hopefully be the level of hospitality offered to them as Christ’s representative. It comes after hard teachings about coming persecutions (“I’m sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves”; Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword –realistically, his teachings were radical and would cause some deep divisions.) Hospitality was probably not their first expectation.

You have come to this church from a variety of experiences – some have been here since childhood or at least in some church since childhood. Others may be very new to this community or any faith community. What do you think one is looking for when he or she dares to cross the threshold of the front door? What are the fears?

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That’s just one story. There are other stories. I am once again dismayed by our denominational double message regarding the inclusion of persons regardless of sexual orientation. For congregations like ours who have committed ourselves to be open to all persons, I feel it compels us to not just desire to be open but to make it a very public statement, because for those outside our doors they may first see them as closed. Is it time for us to take the steps to explore becoming a congregation in the Reconciling Church Network? Do we need a commitment statement that says to others – “All truly are welcome here”.

I’ve read just excerpts of a book by Christine Pohl called: “Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition”

(Christine D. Pohl, Eerdmans, 1999.)

This is a work in ethical archaeology. Pohl digs through the centuries' layers and discovers hospitality as a way of living out the Gospel that was once central to Christian experience, but for several centuries has been marginalized. She argues convincingly that the church needs to recover the practice of hospitality, not only because it meets the needs of the poor but also for the church's own sake.

The biblical demand for hospitality, Pohl shows, is clear in both Old and New Testaments. The people of God are aliens and strangers whom God has welcomed into the "household of faith." In turn, God's people are to "make room" for the stranger, not only in the community of faith but also in their own personal households. This is the biblical meaning of hospitality—making room for the stranger, especially those in most acute need. Such care must not be reduced to mere social entertaining nor may it be self-interested and reciprocal; instead, biblical hospitality reaches out to the abject and lowly and expects nothing in return. Hospitality is not optional, nor should it be understood as a rare spiritual gift; instead, it is a normative biblical practice that is learned by doing it.

Hospitality is implicitly subversive in the way it shatters social boundaries, especially those boundaries enforced by table fellowship. When we eat with the lowly and welcome strangers and "sinners" to our table, we topple social expectations and bear witness to the kind of love God has for all his creatures.

It is not coincidental that Jesus perhaps most scandalized his critics in his practice of table fellowship. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners"—this was not a compliment. And it was precisely the radical nature of Christian hospitality, Pohl shows, that characterized the early church, helped spread the Gospel, and healed the dramatic social barriers that initially confronted the church as the Gospel permeated the Greco-Roman world.

Is there a ministry of table hospitality in our future? Two stories: one comes from a church in our Annual Conference. Golden Hill UMC in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Set in the heart of that small city right across the Sound from us, Golden Hill began a Sunday evening dinner and informal worship service – open to everyone. It began small, really just a vision – but it grew to have a significant number of regular attendees. Many of those who attended were homeless or very poor – but they weren't the only people who sought out this fellowship.

Tell story of John: My friend John is married to a life long active Methodist but he had no experience and no interest in Sunday morning worship. He'd stay home and watch the Sunday morning news programs. Then he got involved in this ministry. The extension of table hospitality offered a community John could love to be part of.

Is there a ministry of table hospitality in our future? Can we dream? It may not be to the poor and homeless in this location – we're too far off the beaten track of public transportation but it might be having a regular team that serves at Hospitality House or teams with St. James RC and the Welcome Inn ministry. Or maybe we have a unique ministry that offers hospitality and a meal to student groups from the university. What if we were to network with the hosting of international students and create a team of persons who pair up and host in their homes but perhaps on a monthly basis we all come together for a community meal with an open interfaith worship experience.

The connection between hospitality and Jesus is indeed rich and mysterious. As Pohl shows, in New Testament perspective Jesus is simultaneously guest, host, and meal. He is guest whenever we welcome and care for the stranger and the broken (Mt. 25:31-46). He is host, for example, when he hosts the Last Supper, during which "we . . . celebrate the reconciliation and relationship available to us because of [Jesus'] sacrifice and through his hospitality" (p.30)—and when he will host the Great Supper in the Kingdom. And he himself, as our paschal sacrifice, is the meal we eat, not

only in Communion but in ongoing Christian experience as we feed on his life to nourish our own.

In tracing out the history of the Christian practice of hospitality, Pohl marshals an array of quotations from such church leaders as Chrysostom, Lactantius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, as well as 20th century practitioners of hospitality such as Dorothy Day and Edith Schaeffer. It is clear from the historical account given here that extraordinary attention was paid to hospitality as a normative Christian practice through the entirety of church history until relatively recent times.

Have we given up this ministry of hospitality by saying that now it's covered elsewhere. Interestingly, the decline of hospitality as a widely shared tradition is in part traceable to the specialization of hospitality under the pressure of human need. I was reminded that such institutions as hospitals, hostels, hospices, and even hotels--note the shared etymology of all these words as well as "hospitality"—all were developed by Christians as they responded with increasing specialization to various forms of human need.

Yet the specialization and eventual bureaucratization of care weakened hospitality as an aspect of everyday Christian practice. Today most Christians do not welcome refugees or the homeless into their homes; if we are concerned at all about such people, we most often send money to help fund specialized efforts undertaken by someone else.

What are we missing? Just ask Malcolm and Waveney about how their hospitality to a Vietnamese family in the 70's still impacts their lives. That was a specific wave of immigrants displaced by a war of our making that came under care – often Christian networks and it was through congregational risk and action that those families became welcomed into this country – not without conflict because of those who only saw them as potential “enemies. Is there a place of hospitality that we have to offer to the immigrant populations in our communities today? Can we get past the arguments of “legal” and “illegal”, and hear again the cry of these refugees who are in our midst? Michelle has recently connected with the Eastern Farm Workers and is passionate about their plight.

Hospitality is a practice that is good for the Christian soul. We lose something of the distinctive nature of Christian discipleship when we delegate the work entirely to specialists.

Welcoming the stranger – offering hospitality is at the heart of Christianity. It doesn't come without major challenges to be overcome. It really has to start in our hearts: the commitment to be inconvenienced.

Challenge of our “sameness”: for someone who doesn't meet what appears to be our profile (i.e white, 35-70, family oriented, straight, middle class) it may feel like a barrier to enter the community.

Challenge to meet the Christ in you and you meet the Christ in me.