

LESSONS IN LIVING

What Does it Mean to Offer Hospitality?

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Babs Miller
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Scripture Reading: Luke 7:36-48 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

In our Bible passage today we find Jesus being invited into the home of a Pharisee named Simon. For reasons not disclosed, Simon has not extended the customary courtesies of hospitality to Jesus. Now remember that we are talking about desert country and people who travel by foot or by donkey. You can imagine how dirty one could get walking in sandals and how dry one's skin and hair could get exposed to the elements of heat, sand and wind. Basic common courtesies of hospitality included foot washing, anointing with fragrant oils and a kiss of welcome. These basic forms of hospitality were always to be extended to a guest in your home and to strangers in the area who were to be invited into homes to stay the night as there were few inns in each area. This basic hospitality was the process by which outsiders were changed into guests. The ritual of foot washing marked that movement from stranger to guest. There were expectations tied to hospitality, too. Once hospitality was offered and accepted, neither the host nor the guest were allowed to show any signs of hostility towards the other. They could only do that which showed honor towards one another.

But Simon did none of these things for Jesus-no foot washing, no anointing, no kiss, no protecting his guest Jesus from the woman of ill repute who entered his house with a jar of fragrant oil. In fact Simon decides that Jesus is a fake because if he were a true prophet he would have known this woman was a sinner and sent her away. But the woman, instead of Simon, washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She then kisses his feet and anoints them with her perfumed oil. Jesus lets Simon know that she, rather than Simon, is the one who responded out of love.

The measure of hospitality is very different today but no less important. One of my favorite more modern day stories of hospitality comes from Martin Bell's book "Distant Fire". It goes like this:

“Huddled into a faded gray shawl, wide-eyed, she stares at the barrel that is alive with fire. Cold, damp air clings to her like odorous fog. Around the barrel are gathered all the hopeless, the ragged, the hard people. An old man shoves her away when she tries to step closer to the fire. Everywhere faces are maniacal, hell-inspired. Later, in a corridor formed by bleak city walls, she walks, thinking: It is so unthinkable cold. I can’t even bear the thought of sleeping on a cold sidewalk. Thinking it while she is praying, praying without actual words, wishing she had a bottle of whiskey and a safe, warm bed for the night. She walks the dying city streets with her lips forming unheard syllables again and again, praying ---until it happens. At a dark intersection, while she waits for traffic to clear, a cab cuts too close to the curb and throws cold, greasy water onto her legs. Then it seems as though the water has erased from her every vestige of courage. She sits down on the curb. For a long time, with head lowered, she sits there, her lips no longer moving. After that she hears another car; it stops nearby and the door clicks open. Oh God, she says inside herself, I’ve got to move, I’ve got to move right now. But her body does not remember how to respond, does not stir, even when a hand touches her shoulder. Moreover, the woman’s eyes do not see who it is that places a wool blanket around her body, sets a large bundle of food on the sidewalk next to her. And in a moment the car has driven away. She sees only receding tail-lights as she rocks back and forth on the curb, holding fast to the thick wool blanket, forming soundless words again and again with her lips.”

Because we have an obsession about germs and odors we have developed the capacity to completely obscure the human smell and thus do not need foot washing and anointing with perfumed oils for our guests. But hospitality remains a justice issue that God continues to invite us to address. We are called to provide companionship, care for the soul and to invite all into fellowship with us. We are called to assist each other in a spirit of compassion and understanding in our struggles with illnesses of the body, mind or spirit. When we say “each other” we are not just talking about the ones sitting next to us in the pew. We are talking about people we encounter each and every day at work...on the streets...in the grocery store...in the newspaper... or the 6 o’clock news.

Offering hospitality in any situation or setting is really about a ministry of presence. It’s being willing to be with someone as they travel through their pain and suffering. To be present requires that we not give in to the temptations of advice giving or problem solving for someone else. When we give advice or otherwise try to fix someone else, what we really are saying to them is “I know what is best for you. You can’t solve your own problems. Here, let me fix this situation that you obviously can’t fix for yourself.” We don’t mean to be saying those things but unfortunately we are.

Instead we need to be willing to walk with them on their journey as a companion. We must be willing to walk beside them, not in front of them so as to lead them in the *right* direction and not behind them to push them along. To walk beside someone requires that we learn to listen without

comment or judgment. We need to be willing to honor pauses and/or silences. To honor silences requires that we be comfortable with silence ourselves. We have to learn to listen for the feelings being shared and to recognize that there are things not being said, too. We have to find ways to communicate our willingness to just be with them and to invite them to elaborate on their story when they are ready to do so.

We also have to listen to ourselves and how we are responding to others. Do we respond in a way that allows the conversation to continue and the bond between us to grow or do we respond in such a way that we end the conversation and put unnecessary tension on the bond between us? Do we have adequate boundaries that will allow others to fully be their own person? Without adequate boundaries we become part of the problem.

All of these things are a part of showing hospitality. And showing hospitality to another person takes time because relationships are not like instant cream of wheat. We can't create the finished product of true companionship quickly.

To accompany someone on any portion of this journey called life is also an act of hope. It is a belief in promise and possibility, trusting that the Spirit will always support our journey towards wholeness. Remember, too, the times you have been on the receiving end of hospitality and know that there will be times when you will need that gift again. Maybe you are in that place today of needing hospitality. We want to be able to offer the same kind of hospitality that we have received and will receive in the future.

A few years ago I participated in a workshop that encouraged us to recognize the hero in everyone we encountered. We were trying to learn to see others as heroes on their own unique journeys fully capable of solving their own problems and issues. Our job as we were invited to accompany them on a part of their journey was to listen and to invite them to express what authentic action they were willing to take to address their expressed concerns. It was not our job to suggest authentic actions because then they were not authentic. Authentic actions came from within their own storehouse of wisdom and willingness.

After many hours of discussion about all of this, we were shown a video of 20 short dialogues of probably 2 minutes or less each. While watching these brief dialogues we were to write down our impressions of each individual. Even days after working with this concept of treating everyone as heroes we all immediately fell back into old habits of analyzing each problem and "knowing" exactly what each person needed to do to solve their problems. Old habits die hard and so we must also be gentle with ourselves at the same time that we seek to change our old patterns of interacting with others.

A ministry of presence says that we are not visiting that person in the hospital to tell them our war stories about hospitals or their particular situation that put them there. We visit them to let them know we care and that we are willing to just be with them and walk with them through their hospital stay. When we visit someone who has lost a loved one we need to remember that

there are no magic words or special remedies for grief. All we can offer is our willingness to be there with them and to walk through that dark valley with them reminding them that they are not alone and that they are loved.

I wonder what would happen if we offered the people of Afghanistan true hospitality instead of unmanned drones? Or if we even offered our neighbors in Mexico the same level of hospitality as we offer our neighbors in Canada? How about our friends in south east Austin...or on our porch?

Offering hospitality seems like a simple enough task to do and those who do it well make it seem effortless. The rewards of being allowed to offer true hospitality to others defies adequate description. It really is an incredible gift to be allowed to share in someone else's journey. Offering hospitality requires discipline, practice and dedication on our part. It requires life-long learning because some of us are easier to be in relationship with than others. But God does not say offer hospitality to those who it is easy to be with. Because we want to be able to offer hospitality to a wide range of folks, we will be offering a couple of learning experiences later this fall on "hospitality." One offering will be a workshop on the ministry of hospitality in late October. The other will be a book study on the book "Souls in the Hands of a Tender God," which is a book about offering hospitality to homeless individuals. Both of these offerings will be designed to help us hone our skills of hospitality. For it is when we build our capacity for community that souls flourish and we lay the foundation for a just, peaceable and healing world that truly includes the least and the most broken among us.

When we offer hospitality hope can be restored and that spark of faith that has nearly disappeared can be ignited. A new world can be opened up for us all. Then all will know that they are "Souls in the Hands of a Tender God."

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