

Discipleship: Radical Hospitality

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Texts: Matthew 9:23-10:23; Genesis 18:1-15

The theme of hospitality is woven through the Bible, emerging over the course of the entire Bible as one of its persistent themes, like love, forgiveness, prayer, generosity.... Both of today's stories are partly about hospitality, although it is woven through the larger stories. Abraham's story is about his journey to becoming the patriarch of Israel – but on the winding path to becoming a father, Abraham offered hospitality to three strangers – and that practice of hospitality was noted centuries later by the anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in the quote on the bulletin cover: *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Jesus, in his instructions to his disciples also touches on hospitality, although less obviously. Hospitality is a mutual practice – and accepting hospitality is also practicing hospitality, so sending the disciples out to depend on hospitality was teaching them to practice the same kind of acceptance in being guests. Like much that is basic to Christianity, hospitality is essential to the human experience. In our day, hospitality is kind of a loaded concept – we may think of hospitality as demanding the skills of a Martha Stewart, or following the rules of Emily Post. That's not really the kind of hospitality the Bible is describing.

While setting a beautiful table with fine china and the forks and spoons all in the right places can be a gesture of love, all too often our thinking about those things can be a barrier to the spiritual practice of hospitality because we can think of hospitality as something too complicated. Perhaps it is useful to distinguish between entertaining and hospitality. Nothing wrong with entertaining – it can be part of hospitality, but it is not necessary to hospitality. A cup of cold water and a listening ear can be hospitality.

Genuine hospitality is about welcome and offering safe space. In ancient times, it could be about literally offering safe space. Indeed, in recent history, people offered runaway slaves safe hospitality on the Underground Railroad in the 19th century; others offered Jewish people safe hospitality in Europe in the 20th century. Many European countries as well as Canada have extended hospitality to Syrian refugees in the last year. The Bible's instructions about hospitality certainly include this kind of life-saving safe space.

But while hospitality can mean the difference between life and death, it really is much more basic to ordinary life – and conflating hospitality with those kinds of extreme situations can cause us to ignore the important part that hospitality should play in the lives of ordinary disciples. For us, it can mean the difference between life lived on the surface, and deep life, abundant life, the life for which we were created.

So what is hospitality and why is it so essential? Again, it is about welcome and offering safe space. The original hospitality is the welcome and safe space that God offers each and all of us –

that total, unconditional acceptance is what creates the safe space: we didn't earn it and we can't forfeit it. And the hospitality that we are called to offer others is grounded in that same acceptance and love, and that is what creates safe space – we accept others as God has accepted us; we extend love to others as God has extended love to us, and when hospitality is offered to us, we accept it wholeheartedly.

The authors of the wonderful little book *Radical Hospitality* explain the spirituality of hospitality as it has been practiced by Benedictine communities of monks or nuns, and how we all can undertake the practice of hospitality. They explain the importance of hospitality and contrast it with fear in this way:

Being a people who fear the stranger, we have drained the life juices out of hospitality... Hospitality is a lively, courageous, and convivial way of living that challenges our compulsion either to turn away or to turn inward and disconnect ourselves from others.

Hospitality is not optional to a well-balanced and healthy life. It meets the most basic of human needs to be known and to know others. It addresses the core loneliness that we avoid with the bustle and haste of our hectic lives. There is a big loneliness at the center of every person. It is universal.

...To receive others is to expose myself to all sorts of frightful dangers of attachment and rejection. Hospitality acknowledges the vulnerability of being human, both my vulnerability and that of the stranger...We are vulnerable and we need each other.¹

Hospitality isn't just about getting together regularly with our friends – although that is certainly a dimension of practicing hospitality. It's not necessarily about inviting people into our homes – although hospitality includes this. Some of us are uncomfortable with this. Maybe we don't think our homes measure up to the expectations of others – the carpet is worn, the room needs a fresh coat of paint, the bathroom sink drips, we're more cluttered than others, our plates don't match, and our spoons have had too many trips into the garbage disposal. I really get this. This is one of my struggles. But when we let these fears keep us from welcoming people into our homes, we are making hospitality about impressing others rather than welcoming others. Yet as meaningful as welcoming people into our homes may be, it is really a small issue and a distraction within the larger practice of hospitality. We shouldn't put off our practice of hospitality until we feel comfortable inviting others over. We can practice hospitality without bringing people to our homes, and we can bring people to our homes without really practicing hospitality.

Hospitality is essentially a choice of how we approach the world and our lives – from a stance of openness, welcome, and vulnerability rather than from a stance of reserve, self-protection, and fear. Many of us are comfortable with welcoming our friends, but may not have chosen a stance of hospitality to govern our whole lives. Most of us, even if we are committed to the practice of hospitality, have to repeatedly make this a choice – most of us have some fears about other people,

¹ Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, O.S.B. *Radical Hospitality* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2002) 10, 11, 12

whether those are physical fears that a stranger might harm us, or social fears that we might be hurt, or embarrassed, or judged if we open up ourselves and our lives to others. What if we don't know what to say? What if we meet the eyes of a stranger and smile and they turn away? What if we share our authentic self with someone and they laugh, or disagree, or think we are weird? What if we extend ourselves in friendship, and someone doesn't want to be our friend? Most of us have experienced this sort of judgment and it doesn't feel good. It hurts.

But didn't Jesus show us a way of being that flowed from his own integrity, his own convictions about how to be in the world? He didn't decide how to be with people based on whether they accepted him or not. So let's try to learn from Jesus – and in doing that, we'll learn three foundational dimensions of hospitality: welcoming God, welcoming ourselves, welcoming life. And these woven together will equip us to practice hospitality with others.

Why would we welcome God? Isn't God part of our lives whether we extend a welcome or not? I'm remembering the sign that was engraved over the front door of psychologist Carl Jung's house, as well as on his tombstone: "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." Yes, God is present. But welcoming God is a way of turning our presence toward God, noting that God is present, realizing that we are not alone, remembering that our inner resources are not the only resources at hand. So part of practicing hospitality is welcoming God – and of course, remembering that the hospitality that we practice is indeed God's hospitality. We are participating in that larger hospitality of God's love, God's welcome to each and every creature, every person.

We also need to extend welcome to ourselves. This is where some of the real transformative value of the practice of hospitality comes. We are quick to categorize people – and we are quick to pass judgment on ourselves. And those judgments can be fairly durable. Some of those judgments come from things others have said about us or to us; others have come from our own assessments. And whether these judgments are negative or positive, they tend to be limiting. *I have a good sense of color; I'm a slow runner; I'm a good cook; I don't understand science easily.* Even the positive judgments are limiting: they tell us where strengths are located. Can we be open to the reality that we don't know ourselves nearly as well as we think we do? There are possibilities within each of us that we haven't recognized yet. We have capacities of which we are unaware. We may even have feelings that we don't know about. So when we think of welcoming the stranger – there may be a stranger or two within us waiting for a welcome from us.

And in addition to the parts of ourselves that we don't know about, there are also parts of ourselves that we don't like. Remember those judgments we pass on ourselves? If we are going to be able to welcome the stranger and the enemy in the world, as God urges us to do, then we need to begin by welcoming the stranger and the enemy within. It may seem kind of trendy and precious – but we need to fully accept ourselves before we will be able to extend full-hearted welcome to others. If we can't welcome our whole selves, our welcome to others will always be contingent—waiting for that discovery that will cause us to shut an inner door. What are those parts of ourselves with which we are uncomfortable, or which we don't like? Once we have welcomed our full selves—the parts we delight in, the parts that baffle us, the parts we don't like—then we can be full selves. As long as we were closing the door on parts of ourselves, we couldn't be fully present. We couldn't trust ourselves completely. And we really can't fully welcome others until we are ready to fully accept ourselves. Also, until we fully accept ourselves,

we will always be too vulnerable to the judgments of others. We may want to hide parts of ourselves – and so we will be paying more attention to ourselves than to others.

The next piece is to begin to welcome all of life. My mother used to say, frequently, “It is as it is, if it isn’t as it ought to be.” This is more than a pithy saying, it is a stance of acceptance in life. It isn’t passivity—we still work for justice, we still seek to learn new things, and improve ourselves. But it includes facing life as it is in a given moment. And indeed, some of our work for justice is an extension of hospitality – as we fully welcome others, we desire to provide for each person the same opportunities, the same access, the same guarantees that we want for ourselves. So working for universal health care, for an end to hunger and poverty, for immigrant rights, civil rights, LGBT rights – these are the social and political dimensions of the same ethic of hospitality that calls us to welcome the stranger as God as welcomed us.

Until we learn to fully face and accept all of our life as it is in the moment, we will miss some of the riches and possibilities that we will not receive if we only recognize the parts that we like. Some of the deepest good that comes into our lives comes not seeming good at the outset. Learning to welcome all of life – being open to the changes that come, letting go of our assumptions about how life is, how we are, how God is, and welcoming life as it comes, welcoming ourselves as we are in each moment, welcoming God as we experience God – these foundational practices of welcome prepare us to welcome others. And we welcome others – those we know, and those we don’t know – in the same spirit of welcome and openness to who they are, that we practice with ourselves. This is particularly essential in long-term relationships, where we easily fall into the same kind of assumptions that we had about ourselves. So as we learn to welcome the actual husband, wife, son, or daughter that is present on a given day instead of the person we had long ago decided they were, we give them the gift of total acceptance.

And total acceptance is a gift of freedom—Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Being able to welcome who people truly are grants them the freedom to be their authentic selves with us. Being able to be this accepting, this vulnerable, this honest with one another creates safe space, the space where depth and transformation can occur. So hospitality is also a practice of paying attention, of being present to the moment, and the people and circumstances of that moment. Being able to be that present permits us to listen deeply to them, and deep listening is one of the basic practices within hospitality.

A cup of cold water and a listening ear can be hospitality. Fully accepting a person, just as they are, and offering welcome. This kind of deep welcome is the welcome we all need, we all want; it is the welcome we find in God. And practicing this hospitality—to God, to ourselves, to life, and to all people who come into our lives—is a choice which will lead us to find the deep blessings that are always available in life. We may entertain angels unaware. Amen.

