

Welcoming the Stranger

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Our thoughts this morning on hospitality come mainly from three sources: scripture, the book “Radical Hospitality” by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt and our experiences at the International Guest House. For those who are unfamiliar with IGH...the Guest House at 1441 Kennedy Street has been serving persons from around the world for the past 41 years and continues to be a place where hospitality is shared and where volunteers’ understanding of hospitality is formed and strengthened.

In the scriptures read this morning, we along with the early Christians are instructed to practice hospitality and to welcome the stranger. Very little description accompanies this instruction other than that we are to love each other as brothers and sisters. What does it mean to extend hospitality? How do we practice it?

Hospitality as defined by our culture today is being the gracious host or hostess who entertains guests according to a certain protocol. Today's hospitality conjures images of etiquette, Martha Stewart or the hospitality services industry as it relates to entertainment and tourism businesses.

How has culture’s definition of hospitality eroded our understanding of what Jesus and the early church meant by living hospitably? I was reminded this week of the influence of culture’s definition on my understanding of hospitality when one of our guests, a woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, told me in her culture a woman is no stranger in another woman’s kitchen. She told me this as she insisted on carrying dishes from the breakfast table to our “staff kitchen.” Her description struck me as I remembered myself making statements in the past such as, “no two women can

function happily in the same kitchen." We, in our individualized American culture, have come to claim our private space as our own and we rarely think in terms of sharing our space openly with the stranger!

While the scriptures we read this morning come from letters to the early churches, there are many stories and examples of hospitality throughout the Bible. The story of Abraham welcoming three men at the entrance to his tent turns out to be God in person with a message! The story of the Good Samaritan offers wonderful images of caring for the stranger. Jesus meeting the woman at the well models engagement with the stranger in a profoundly loving, personal and confrontive manner. Jesus' visit in the home of Mary and Martha adds to our understanding of the kind of hospitality we are called to live. Throughout the Bible it becomes apparent that hospitality is a defining characteristic of the followers of Jesus! True hospitality lies in the heart of God.

True hospitality is more about "being available to the other" than about being a gracious hostess or entertainer. Jesus' encounters with Zacchaeus and Nicodemus were not planned ahead, well- prepared-for meetings or dinner engagements. Rather, on the spur of the moment, on the road, Jesus met Zacchaeus. And in the late night Jesus welcomes Nicodemus and his questions even though Jesus may have been ready to relax. Jesus' hospitality models being available to the stranger.

Homan and Pratt suggest two things necessary to practice hospitality. They are cloister which may be defined as solitude and secondly community.

Because hospitality means making space in our lives for the stranger, inner preparation is required on our part to be comfortable with ourselves. This means confronting the stranger within us. Finding time for solitude is one way we prepare to

meet the stranger. It is difficult to make time for solitude in our lives. The demands of work, family and daily existence prevent us from attending to the inner needs of our souls. Failing to make a space for solitude in our lives is likely our strongest hindrance to hospitality. At IGH we can spend much time and energy cleaning the rooms, preparing the food and making sure the house is inviting and ignore the true source of where hospitality begins to form, which is within each of us. You have most likely seen the t-shirt "I love D.C." Well, at IGH we have come to understand that to mean "I love deep cleans," which is the thorough cleaning we do to each guest room each month to be sure the rooms are free of all spider webs, black marks, dust and dirty windows. Another more crucial understanding of "I love DC" could be "I love deep centering," meaning the time we take to listen to our hearts, to our longings and to God meeting our longings.

Holman and Pratt say "Hospitality is born in us when we are well loved by God and by others. Hospitality is the overflowing of a heart that has to share what it has received. It takes a whole person to open up, it takes a secure person to be available, it takes a strong person to give yourself away." (p. 20)

Only the secure person can live with an open heart. Hospitality enables you to joyfully make room for another inside your open heart. It stretches the brittle, tight heart. A closed-up heart can never relax, never allow you to enjoy another, to play, to relish the unguarded moment of surprise. (p. 26)

Jesus' visit in the home of Mary and Martha is informative instruction in this regard. Jesus' words to Martha as written in the Message Bible: "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only

is essential, and Mary has chosen it — it's the main course, and won't be taken from her." Time with God, as Mary chose, allows the Spirit of God to satisfy our longings and to form us in God's image thus providing the security to open our hearts and lives to the stranger.

Whomever the stranger, we are called to offer hospitality. Because in meeting the stranger we are meeting God who comes to us in that person. We are particularly encouraged to share ourselves with those not like ourselves — without requiring that they become like us to receive our attention and care.

We all have a tendency to protect ourselves from the other. As children we are warned to beware of the stranger. We notice this hesitancy of openness to the stranger at IGH when we inform persons that our rooms are shared rooms with persons of the same gender. One night two women, one from Rwanda and one from China, came to IGH together and were assigned to a three-bed room. They resisted the news that they would have another roommate whom they did not know. It was interesting to note in the next few days how much these three women enjoyed each other. Jennifer, their roommate from Texas who was moving to Washington to work at the Pentagon, graciously showed them around the city. We enjoyed watching their friendship develop. Living in an atmosphere of openness and trust encourages the development of new friendships.

Jesus modeled community as he met with and taught the disciples. As we experience community in our families, as staff at IGH or within our church we are formed and grow in our ability to extend hospitality to the stranger.

An Indian man in the country of Mexico understood clearly our need for community. “In a sprawling market in Mexico City, Pota-lamo was selling onions. Twenty strings of onions lay in front of him. A woman from Denver walks up and asks,

‘How much for a string of onions?’

Ten cents.

How much for two strings?

Twenty cents.

What about three?

Thirty cents.

Not much of a reduction for quantity. Would you take 25 cents for three?

No.

Well, how much for all of it, the whole 20 strings?

I will not sell you the whole 20 strings.

Why not? Aren’t you here to sell onions?

No, I am here to live my life. I love this market. I love the crowds. I love the sunlight and smells. I love the children. I love to have my friends come by and talk about their babies and their crops. This is my life and for that reason I sit here with my 20 strings of onions. If I sell all my onions to you, then my day is over and I have lost the life that I love and that I will not do.”

As we experience the joys of community we are drawn to reach out with the practice of hospitality. This congregation and Allegheny Conference have practiced hospitality in a manner that is probably unparalleled in the Mennonite church. For 41 years guests have experienced hospitality at the International Guest House at a level

that has them shaking their heads and asking do you have other houses like this? They come to us asking for more. Do you have one of these in Chicago, San Francisco or Honolulu? What is it at IGH that has guests asking for more?

Is it the \$35 per night per person? Is Hyattsville Mennonite merely in the business of providing cheap lodging? Or might it be the fresh baked muffins? Some persons believe that the ultimate in traveling pleasures is the turned down bedspread with chocolates on the pillow or the expansive exercise room.

Our guests disagree. They speak of coming to IGH as coming home. They comment on how quiet it is here! They like the connections they make with people at tea time and breakfast. They prefer this to the isolation of a motel room.

The practice of hospitality at IGH provides an answer to hostility. Our country has attempted to rid itself of the stranger, the terrorist by killing. Hospitality welcomes the stranger and transforms instead of kills. Strangers become family when they experience welcoming hospitality.

Last fall we witnessed that transformation when George (all names have been changed), a European working for a U.S. consulate in Germany, joined us. At breakfast our conversation turned to the turmoils of the Middle East as a Palestinian guest told of the pain and suffering of his people. One of us as staff voiced criticism of the U.S. policies that favor Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. With raised voice and red face George replied, "You just don't understand what the Israelis face!" And with that a heated argument between our two guests left all at the table uneasy. Following the meal George offered, I suppose you won't want me back tonight.

That night we could hear conversation in George's room lasting beyond the midnight hour. What we didn't realize was that these two gentlemen were sharing a room for two. The next morning we were puzzled to find George warmly embracing his Palestinian roommate. They asked us to take a picture of them together. It was later that we were able to ask George, "What happened last night?" He replied, "He told me stories of his life in Palestine and I now have a new awareness of and respect for life in that troubled land!"

Hospitality also offers us the freedom to voice our doubts and fears.

Jerry came to us while attending meetings at the World Bank. This citizen of the United Kingdom who had been with us for nearly two weeks was hoping for a job in Geneva that would bring him closer to his home and family. One morning Helen chose for the morning devotional to share a prayer concern and offered guests the opportunity to do the same. Jerry responded quickly with "Right now I am bloody angry with God. In fact, I don't even know if I believe in a God. I didn't get the job I wanted and my wife is angry with me and blames me for not getting the job. And now I don't know that I can even pray."

A moment later he softened and volunteered an experience that he had. He said "I was flying to the U.S. when I had what I think was a vision that I can only describe as from God. I disagree violently with the policies of George Bush. In fact, it is so extreme that I have had thoughts of vomiting on the president. But in the vision I saw President Bush as a little boy being bathed in God's love. I don't know what to make of it but to believe that it must have been from God.

Hospitality offers us the freedom to venture into the difficult when we have experienced the warmth and acceptance of a place called home.

Tammy, a 22 year-old from Panama, came to Washington by herself. She lives alone in an apartment while she studies and works in her homeland. She came to tour Washington, but then we discovered she had another agenda as well. She wanted to search for her father whom she had never met who lives in this area. He did not know she was coming and she had only sketchy information of his whereabouts. He had made no attempts to find her and she did not know how he might respond to her attempts to make contact. She tracked him down to a particular apartment building and the receptionist told her he was not in. After hours of waiting she gave up the search. We worried about her and wondered if she could handle a negative conclusion to her quest. What we didn't know was that her roommates who learned to know her at IGH were also extending hospitality. They came early to breakfast with worried faces when one night Tammy did not return as they had expected. Tammy experienced relationships at IGH that supported her in her uneasy quest for her father.

Hospitality demonstrates God's love in action.

Many of you met Osama of Iraq who attended Hyattsville with us on a number of occasions. This week I received an email from Osama who is now in Vancouver, BC. He wrote, "Today morning I received mail from IGH related to me, I would like to thank you very much! Oh!!!! Really I am too eager to visit IGH, I miss IGH wonderful staff and breakfast, tea time, conversations to guests, vacuuming...etc,"

Osama often remarked that through his experience with the Mennonite church he discovered a faith that practices what it preaches. He often complained of persons who

talked of faith but did not evidence faith in their lives. Osama asked us to allow him to vacuum. It was his way of becoming one of us. In this way he could also demonstrate faith in action.

About a month ago, LeAnne Zook asked us if we wanted to be a part of pick and pound. Pick a topic and pound the pulpit! She should have known that we are not the pulpit pounding types! But we do have something we want to say to our friends at Hyattsville and Allegheny Conference.

Don't lose the diamond that you have at 1441 Kennedy Street. We believe that you are practicing Romans 12 and Hebrews 13 there. It is one of the most powerful forms of mission that we have experienced. During the last year 1,074 guests representing 83 countries experienced the hospitality of Hyattsville and Allegheny Conference. Where else can you find the opportunity to impact so many from such diverse places?

Currently Gene Miller, Glen Gehman, Ilene Winebrenner, T.J. Tenefoss and Annabelle Kratz serve on the IGH board. They provide leadership along with other board members. Some day it will be time for others to take this leadership. We pray there will be people ready to carry on the vision of offering hospitality to strangers from around the world. It takes work to find and coordinate volunteers. Annabelle has played a consistent and steadying role for IGH for years. Who will take on her responsibility when she says it is time for another?

And so in closing we want to say:

Hyattsville, we thank you for the opportunity you have provided countless volunteers who have experienced life at the Guest House.

Hyattsville, we thank you on behalf of Osama, for providing a safe place to be when life was most difficult.

Hyattsville, we thank you on behalf of Jerry for providing a place where it is safe to explore doubts.

Hyattsville, we thank you on behalf of George for a place where new understandings are formed and hostilities are put to rest.

Hyattsville, we thank you on behalf of Tammy for a place that provided security and acceptance while life's issues were troublesome.

Hyattsville, we thank you on behalf of the thousands of guests over the years who found the International Guest House to be not only affordable housing but much more — a place of welcome and hospitality, a place where the way of Jesus has been experienced, a place where the stranger is welcomed and becomes friend.