

# **Humility and Hospitality**

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Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

I had a dream this week that I was trying to make a beautiful meal in an unfamiliar kitchen, with unfamiliar food and inadequate cookware (everything seemed to be a steamer with holes in it). I finally gave up and put the food on the table even though it was not up to my standards. I awkwardly sat down at the head of the table only to look up and see that I was sitting between two people that make me very uncomfortable; two people I would probably not invite to my house for a meal. In the extreme they might be called enemies. I had worked so hard, come up with a terrible meal and then had to sit between two guests whom I didn't like and certainly didn't invite.

What to do? What we always do, hold out our hands and pray. But I was speechless; I had no prayer in me. From next to me I heard an indecipherable whispered prayer from one of my enemies. And soon from the other end of the table, from a table companion, I heard a prayer that got increasingly louder. It was a complaint, a rant, a recounting of the injustice done by my enemy. I was mortified. One may not like the company at the table, but we don't complain to God right in front of them. I was relieved to wake from my dream before my enemy also began complaining to God about me.

Humiliation is what I was experiencing in my dream. But humiliation is different than humility, which is what today's texts call for and how my grandmother hosted guests over the years.

My maternal grandmother, lovingly called "Mama" by everyone, specialized in hospitality. It was nothing fancy; just down home southern cooking, often served on the front porch picnic table. But people raved about being at "Mama's" house, at Mama's table. She could always stretch the meal and the table if people happened to drive up the long lane right before dinner. Visiting missionaries, international dignitaries, preachers, Bible school teachers, neighbors, friends of friends, her seven children, 20 grandchildren, 100 nieces and nephews, remote acquaintances, women beaten by their husbands, children whose parents couldn't care for them — they were all welcome in her home and at her table.

This "to do" list from Hebrews is something that could have been found on Mama's refrigerator door:

Love, show hospitality to strangers,  
remember those in prison or in pain,  
honor relationships, be content with what is in front of you,  
be aware of God's presence,  
pray for leaders, praise God,  
share with others, do good.

This was how Mama lived a life of hospitality. She lived the verses from Hebrews — with guests, in her travels around the world and sometimes even with her own family. I am sure she entertained angels over the years.

Hospitality, especially table hospitality, is central to the gospel. Jesus loved to sit down and eat with people, and if there wasn't a table he would find a way to have a meal anyway, even if there were 5000 guests. He told parables about wedding feasts, banquets, and inviting people to dinner. And we imitate him, even participate with him in a mysterious way, when we gather at the communion table with other followers of Jesus.

I have been reading the latest popular book from Mennonite Publishing Network, *The Naked Anabaptist*, by Stuart Murray. Strip away all the Mennonite cultural trappings and what is left is Anabaptism at its finest. *Naked Anabaptism* calls us back to the best practices and understandings of our faith. These are not new ideas; it sounds a lot like what we aspire to here at Hyattsville Mennonite.

Jesus and Hebrews pretty much give us *naked hospitality*. Be humble and invite the people who need food and fellowship. That's about it. The problem with nakedness is that it's so exposing. It makes one vulnerable.

Over the years we have clothed hospitality with beautiful tablecloths, china, stemware, multiple knives and forks, the right wine, new recipes and reciprocity. And to help us know how to get hospitality just right we have food channels, clubs and classes. We even have Miss Manners and Emily Post for tricky etiquette questions.

I don't want to negate a well-set table. I am grateful for the care and forethought that the hospitality committee gives to our fellowship meals. I love place cards, candles, flowers, handmade dishes, cloth napkins folded just so. I hope I am not contradicting my thoughts on beauty earlier this summer when I tried to make a case for Beauty with a capital B. And Miss Manners is more necessary than ever. Her combination of humor and care for others is a real necessity when we have become casual not only with our clothing, but with how we treat one another.

But Jesus and the writer of Hebrews give us naked hospitality. It is just not that difficult. And as is often the case, simplicity comes with complications. We are asked to show hospitality to strangers, not to those who can repay us with a sumptuous meal. We are instructed to show hospitality to those who have nothing or may be just passing through. This is not Real DC Housewives where we are performing for the camera. This is not about publicity or 15 minutes of fame. This is humble service, delayed gratification. Repayment comes, as Jesus says, at the resurrection of the righteous, whatever that means.

My dream indicates quite clearly that there are some people with whom I would rather not eat, let alone pray. Jesus is not very sympathetic to my squeamishness. He doesn't demonstrate a lot of patience with the guest who longs to sit at the head of the table and look down on the other guests or the one who is choosy about the other diners. He gives strange instructions that indicate we should go to the back of the line if we think we ought to be at the front. Be humble; it will become clear where you really belong.

As the host, naked hospitality proves even more difficult. Check the guest list. Invite the people who will never repay you, who never get invited anywhere. Invite the people who are least likely to send you a thank you note the next day. It will be fun, you will receive a blessing; just wait.

This may be simple but it sure doesn't sound easy. We need help.

Luckily when it comes to hospitality there are plenty of people ready to give us help with place settings and flower arrangements. There are expert chefs and cuisine magazines to help us out of all our quandaries. But if what we are looking for is a dose of humility with our hospitality, that is harder to find.

I just couldn't stay away from the "Restoring Honor" rally on The Mall yesterday. Thank goodness for streaming Internet. If I was looking for humility and hospitality this was not the place to go. While the Bible was quoted, a lot, which frankly surprised me, today's lectionary passages were not among the quotes. I know I am naïve, but I have never quite heard the Bible joined hand-in-hand with patriotism like I did yesterday.

I do have a new understanding for why people are drawn to this movement. These are people that love their families and their country and don't want to lose what is theirs. They don't want to lose their place at the table; they are not ready or willing to move to a lower table in hopes that someone will eventually notice their humble generosity and move them up later.

If we need help and support to understand and practice naked hospitality I suggest that rather than look to people who purport to be experts on hospitality, or saving the country's honor, we look to the humble people in this very room —

who may have lots to brag about, but rarely do. Together we can try to understand what it means to invite those who don't even make the guest list to come to the wedding banquet. But we cannot do it alone.

We know this and so do others. Several times in the past few months well meaning, Mennonite people of good will, have kindly reminded me that our congregation is not in compliance with MC USA, that we are heading down a path by ourselves. I know this is meant as a friendly signal that if we would just change our ways, we could get invited back to the big party. If we would just be more discriminating with whom we worship and serve then we could once again be part of where the action is.

But naked Anabaptism shows all. Naked hospitality, like naked Anabaptism, is counter cultural, even sometimes counter the institutional church. It is risky. It means we try very hard to be followers of Jesus, the very one who brings salvation.

And what we have discovered is that accepting the salvation that Jesus offers is not necessarily safe and it looks foolish. *Be content with what you have. Keep free of the love of money. When you give a banquet invite those who would otherwise not be invited.* These are not easy words to live by. We absolutely need the community of believers and other Christ followers to even begin to put this into practice.

Naked Anabaptism, as defined by Stuart Murray, emphasizes community along with discipleship. Jesus didn't send his disciples out by themselves, and we shouldn't try to be lone rangers. This is why we have had so many meetings

this summer to discuss marriage and our relationship with each other and with the larger church. This is why other Mennonites are worried about us. As Anabaptists, we take our connection with other Christians and the larger church seriously. We know that accountability is important and it is part of what makes us Anabaptist.

We also know that sometimes what seems obvious in one part of the church is not so obvious in another. It can be a long way from the head table to the lower tables. On one question we may feel as if we are at the lower table with the wedding party barely in sight. On another issue we may be certain we should be at the head table with the lower tables in the distance. Jesus' recommended seating arrangements are rather confusing. But what is clear is that we care about the banquet, about the host and about each other or we wouldn't be tussling so hard over and around the banquet tables.

So let's set the table. Let's do as Mama did: put another leaf in the table and add more broth to the stew. Let's do as Jesus recommends: move on down to the end of the table and invite the stranger to join us.

Let's work together, following the one who sets the table and writes the guest list. And with the writer of Hebrews let us say:

*God is my helper, I am not afraid. What can mere humans do to me?*