

Spiritual Practices-Entertaining Angels Unawares-Gratitude
Deuteronomy 10: 12, 17-19 & Hebrews 13: 1-2
(September 30, 2018)

Writing a sermon on hospitality a week before Thanksgiving took me back to some of my fondest memories as a child. These memories all involve a house full of people, family sleeping over and big meals surrounded by those I loved and those who loved me. Getting together with those we love is important, we need to be reminded that we are part of a tribe, that there are people who look out for us, we need to be with people with whom we can be at ease, letting our hair down without any need for pretense. That's how we usually envision hospitality isn't it?

The biblical version of hospitality differs in some important ways though. Many of us have come to understand hospitality as a low risk and comfortable activity. We invite people into our lives and homes whom we trust, with whom we feel safe, people who don't take us out of our comfort zones. Biblically however, hospitality is a risky and uncomfortable affair. Throughout the Old Testament, the hospitality that pleases God is the welcoming of the stranger¹. In ancient times travel was a dangerous undertaking, the desert is boiling hot during the day and frigid at night. Thieves prowled ancient routes looking for easy pickings. Therefore, codes of hospitality were strict. If a sworn enemy showed up at your door asking for food and shelter you were obliged to give it, and if you travelled through their territory they were obliged to do the same. Hospitality was a matter of survival in a harsh environment; it was a social covenant.² One of things that make Abraham, the great patriarch such a righteous man in the eyes of scripture is his extravagant hospitality. In Genesis 18 he greets three strangers and pleads with them to eat with him and stay the night, he brings them water, washes their feet, Sarah bakes them bread and kills a calf for their supper. This hospitality to the stranger is a theme that Jesus continues in the New Testament where he identifies himself with the stranger; "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."³ He also admonishes the rich and powerful for inviting only those who can return the favour to their banquets. He says instead, invite the poor, the lame, the blind, in other words, those who are a stranger to you.⁴

Biblical hospitality is about opening our hearts and our lives to whomever God places before us. Biblical hospitality is the constant effort to break through the walls we build to protect ourselves, and to approach the other in love.⁵ What challenge this is in our day and age when there is so much fear of the stranger. Technological advances in communication and travel are decreasing the isolation between cultures and religions; there is great hope in this. But, there is also backlash. As we move toward seeing ourselves as a human family, it necessarily means that we have to let go of some

¹ Genesis 18: 1-15, Deuteronomy 1: 16-17; 10: 18, 24:17, 26: 5-11, Leviticus 19: 33-34,

² Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, pp. 120-121

³ Matthew 25: 35

⁴ Luke 14: 12-22

⁵ Nancy Forest, *Hospitality and Marriage*, <http://www.incommunion.org/2008/08/02/hospitality-and-marriage/>

cherished things. The main thing of which we need to let go is the absolute certainty of the primacy of our particular national and religious way of life in favour of dialogue. For some this is a threat, knowledge of the stranger is a threat. Unfortunately, the examples are all too evident these days. There are those that want to exploit fear of the stranger for their own ends. A recent CBC article⁶ detailed how a Russian based company with ties to the Kremlin had it's employees send out tweets inflaming racial tensions in Canada. One falsely claimed that Canadian Football league players were also going down on one knee during the national anthem. A barrage of tweets from this source sought to intensify fears that so-called illegal border crossers were overrunning Canada. Technology has made us increasingly interdependent. Anonymous people with manipulative intent in Russia can and do affect our social cohesion as Canadians. So in a sense, just like in biblical times hospitality is still about survival. The practice of opening our hearts and our lives to whomever God puts in our path is a practice that will help us survive in a world that is getting smaller, a world where ignorance and fear on the smallest scale can have a major impact.

So how does this practice apply to us here in Kitchener-Waterloo? How can we build more of this kind of radical, biblical hospitality into our lives? The first advice is to start small. First, become hospitable to yourself. The poet Rumi has a famous work where he compares the challenge of dealing with the complexity of our inner lives to running a guest house:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.⁷

⁶ Roberto Rocha, "Data sheds light on how Russian Twitter trolls targeted Canadians", August 3, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/russian-twitter-trolls-canada-targeted-1.4772397>

⁷ Jellaludin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks, found at <http://www.sagemindfulness.com/blog/rumi-s-poem-the-guest-house>

Are there parts of you that you hate or reject? What if you stopped judging yourself so harshly and instead treated yourself with compassion and kindness? What if you began to accept yourself as you are; a broken but beloved child of God? What if you viewed those uncomfortable bits of yourself as messages from the Divine? What follows from that is to ask yourself, 'are there people in my life who I have a hard time accepting?' 'Are there people who have a hard time revealing themselves honestly to me: children, a spouse, friends, employees?' Who are those people? Do I need to become less distracted and more present when they are in my company? Do I need to be less ready with an opinion and more curious about their lives? Do I need to have more faith and let them make mistakes? Then ask yourself, who are the people in this community who are not like me? ⁸ What are the opportunities to connect with the strangers in our midst? Is it volunteer work? At Parkminster you can get involved with the Outreach, Inclusive, Reconciliation or Refugee Resettlement Committees. Is it a chat with a neighbour you don't know? How about meeting the eyes of the cashier at the Zehrs and seeing her or him not just for what they are to you but as a beloved child of God?⁹ These small acts may seem trite and insignificant in light of the need for more radical hospitality on a global scale but it is these small steps and changes in our lives that help hospitality to root and grow in our souls so that when the big opportunities come along we are ready. It's the little things that help us to be ready for the big things. It's not called a practice for nothing.

Theologian Henry Knight describes the hope of hospitality this way, he says; "In our broken world, hospitality heals when it is practiced by vulnerable hosts and extended to wounded guests"¹⁰ The hope of hospitality is healing, the healing of divisions that keep us separated from one another. In this healing, the grace, the gift from God is wholeness, to know ourselves as connected to others, not isolated, sharing a common humanity and participating together in the Love that drives creation. Hospitality is an opportunity to participate in the work that God is doing in the world. The stranger invites us to a holy encounter where we entertain angels unawares. Amen.

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⁸ Thompson, 127-130.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *A Geography of Faith: An Altar in the World*, pp.94-95.

¹⁰ Henry Knight, Source Unknown.

