**“Look Who’s Coming to Dinner!”**

**Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42**

**July 21, 2019**

**Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake**

When I was a boy at Rolling Hills Presbyterian Church in Overland Park, Kansas, no one ever mentioned the Christian practice of *hospitality,* of welcoming strangers into community. Perhaps hospitality was an unspoken norm, something Christians just did.

More likely, however, it was because we had a *cultural practice* of hospitality. In the 1960’s rounds of cocktail parties, dinners, and picnics at the homes of family or friends constituted hospitality. Mostly, my childhood church failed at hospitality for a simple reason: there were few wayfarers to welcome! We entertained those we knew. And, in my neighborhood, everybody knew everyone else. New people entered Rolling Hills primarily through *birth—*and there were lots of births!

But (in recent decades) with the old patters of American community life breaking down, the Christian practice of *hospitality* has reemerged as foundational to spiritual life. Contemporary Americans are *nomads,* what Catholic writer Henri Nouwen once called *“a world of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture, and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God.”* [[1]](#footnote-1)

In such a *“world of strangers,”* where fear, anger, and hostility build walls between people and chip away at *communal soulfulness* Nouwen proposed that *“if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.”[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#endnote-1)*

For Nouwen, hospitality is the *“creation of a free space”* where strangers become friends. *“Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.”[[4]](#footnote-3)*

I think this is interesting because both of our scripture readings for this morning deal with the ancient spiritual practice of hospitality.

For example, in Genesis 18, the text sets up the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham to provide descendants through Sarah.

We are told that the Lord *again* appeared to Abraham, but in this case, in the form of *three visitors.* It is unclear whether something about these strangers set them apart as divine or they appeared to Abraham simply as unknown men. Regardless, Abraham quickly acts to provide for them, running from his tent to bow down before them and offering water and food (vv. 2-5). The visitors agree to receive Abraham’s hospitality, and Abraham rushes off again to employ Sarah—and another servant—to prepare a feast. Sarah *“quickly”* makes cakes from choice flour, and Abraham runs to the herd to find a tender calf that the servant hurries to prepare (vv. 6-7). Adding curds and milk to the other preparations, Abraham brings the food to the men and stands with them as they eat (v. 8).

Reflecting on this story, Christine Pohl explores the practice of hospitality within the Christian tradition, drawing a connection between tending to the physical needs of strangers and acknowledging their *“worth and common humanity.”* Throughout the history of the church, sharing food together has been an important means of *“recognizing the equal value and dignity of persons.”[[5]](#footnote-4)*

In fact, Pohl suggests that practicing hospitality today expresses one of the *core-values* of God’s reign and connects us with those in the Bible, like Abraham, who took the risk of engaging hospitality with strangers and met the divine.[[6]](#footnote-5)

In a similar way, in our Gospel reading from Luke (you may recall from last week) that just prior to these verses, Jesus had told the parable of the *Good Samaritan,* a strong and active image of a divine image of hospitality (10:25-37).

Remember, Jesus has now turned toward Jerusalem (9:51), a journey that will ultimately lead to the cross, but these verses have him stopping to stay in the home of Martha and Mary (v. 38). And in this short story, Jesus offers a more nuanced view of hospitality.

You see, while the Good Samaritan in his parable *actively* *cared for* the man in distress, but in this case Jesus prefers Mary’s *attentiveness* to him as a means of showing hospitality, rather than Martha’s focus on attending to the tasks and chores likely associated with the physical needs of her guests.

So, when Martha complains to Jesus and seeks his support in getting Mary to share in the work, he sides with Mary, and so Martha is left with all the work and a reproach from Jesus (vv. 40-42).

This story, of course, is disconcerting for a variety of reasons: it pits the sisters against one another; many listeners (quite naturally) sympathize with Martha more than with Mary; and it (seems) to uphold a more *passive, “listening”* role for women over and against *active service directed toward Jesus.* While Jesus does not explicitly limit women, his choice of Mary over Martha does (seem) to send a message.

Or does it? We need to remember that in Luke, Jesus interacts with more women than in any other Gospel, and the Gospel writer (who also wrote *Acts)* highlights the role of women as leaders in the early church.

Recognizing this, Jane Schaberg offers a redemptive and empowering reading *“behind the text.”* If women do follow the model of Mary, it can be read (as many contemporary scholars do) as *“authorizing women’s solid theological education.”[[7]](#footnote-6)*

This kind of education allows women to *“see through the text” …* in order to claim active roles in leadership for the church.[[8]](#footnote-7)

So, with Genesis 18 and Luke 10 in mind, we need to recognize that hospitality is *not* a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership.

Rather, it is a *central practice of the Christian faith*—something Christians are called to do for the sake of the thing itself. Hospitality draws from the ancient taproots of Christian faith, from the soil of the Middle East, where it is considered a primary virtue of community. And although it is a practice shared by Jews and Muslims, for Christians hospitality holds special significance: *Christians welcome strangers as we ourselves have been welcomed into God through the love of Jesus Christ.* Through hospitality, Christians imitate God’s welcome (for all).

Therefore, hospitality is *not* a program, *not* a single hour or ministry in the life of a congregation. It stands at the heart of a Christian way of life, a living icon of wholeness in God.

In fact, many congregations have discovered how hospitality changes both the *host* and the *guest.* For instance, at *Church of the Epiphany,* an Episcopal congregation in Washington, D.C., they host *“The Welcome Table,”* an 8:00 amworship service, breakfast, and small group Bible study for about two hundred homeless people every Sunday morning. There, guests are called by name (instead of number as is the case at most social service agencies in the city) and dine on china with real silverware as waiters (other members of the church) pour their coffee. When guests leave after the meal, a congregational host says, *“Thank you for coming.” “But we should thank you,”* a homeless man said to one of the hosts. The host quickly responded, *“No, we thank you. You have given to us.”[[9]](#footnote-8)*

At first, those who attended Epiphany’s traditional 11:00 am service simply referred to the 8:00 am people as *“the homeless.”* Gradually, however, *“the homeless”* have become *“guests”* and, now, in many cases *“homeless members,”* or *“members who live on the streets.”* Or simply, Joe, Wanda, or Ted.

Interestingly, when the service was initiated, the liturgy included no collection because the regular church goers (wrongly) thought it inappropriate to ask guests to contribute. However, homeless members insisted that their service should include a traditional offering. They wanted to give back to the church. As the priest reported, *“They felt like they were not real members and asked to contribute.”*

Daniel, a member of the traditional congregation, recalled how moved he was the first time he acted as an usher at the homeless service: *“As the plate passed down the rows, I watched poor people turn their pockets inside out and throw loose change and crumpled dollars in the offering. I almost cried. I learned more about giving that morning than in a thousand sermons.”[[10]](#footnote-9)*

You know, one of the oldest themes in Christian literature about hospitality is the deliberate confusion of the roles of *host* and *guest.* This *role-switching* emphasizes an important point: *as a pilgrim of Christ, you will sometimes be the host and sometimes the guest.* For example, the second-century writer *Diognetus,* reminding his readers about Christian identity, said that *“Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.”[[11]](#footnote-10)* Or, as the great early Christian preacher *John Chrysostom* put it, *“Don’t you know that we live in a foreign land, as though strangers and sojourners?”[[12]](#footnote-11)*

And in our contemporary world of strangers, tourists, and nomads, Henri Nouwen proclaims, *“When hostility is converted into hospitality* ***then*** *fearful strangers can become guests …* ***Then,*** *in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of newfound unity.”[[13]](#footnote-12)*

Friends, in a time of *hate-filled extremism,* some Christians still long for a world of nonviolent love, of reconciling peace, of human wholeness, of true brother and sisterhood, in God’s compassion. For them, ***hospitality*** opens the way to practicing peace, doing a tangible thing that can change the world.

1. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life,* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Ibid., 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid., 8, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Jane Shaberg, “Luke,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary,* ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 37-78 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid., 378 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith,* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2006), 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Ibid., 85, 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Epistle to Diognetus, in *And You Welcomed Me,* ed. Oden, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. John Chrysostom, Homily 16 on Second Corinthians, in *And You Welcomed Me,* ed. Oden, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)