

November 12, 2006  
Genesis 18:1-15, Acts 9:10-19  
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**"The Grace of Hospitality"**

Abraham sits at the entrance of his tent, sheltered from the heat of the noonday sun by the oak trees. For nearly twenty-five years, Abraham and Sarah have wandered throughout the Middle East, sleeping in tents, never building a home, depending upon the mercy of God and the hospitality of strangers. Through the years God has blessed them, protected them and made them prosperous. Perhaps Abraham is contemplating all that has passed and all that is still to come, when he sees three strangers approaching his tent. Abraham springs into action. He welcomes the guests, invites them to refresh themselves and provides the finest flour and choicest meat for their meal. It is a story of gracious hospitality.

The Roman Catholic priest, teacher and writer, Henri Nouwen, noted that we have lost our sense of the importance of hospitality. Today, hospitality makes us think of "tea parties, bland conversation, and a general atmosphere of coziness" (*Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, p.66). The practice of Christian hospitality is about far more than good manners, elegant dinners and congenial conversation shared among friends.

It is time we resurrected the grace of hospitality in the church.

Life in the ancient world depended upon the practice of hospitality. Acts of hospitality preserved human life, met real need and built community. The Scriptures are filled with many acts of costly hospitality. In a time of famine, a widow and her son in Zarephath share their last bit of food with the prophet Elijah; a Shunammite woman builds a room on the roof of her house for the prophet Elisha. Jesus tells a parable about a man who throws a great banquet and invites the poor, the blind and the lame. He tells of a Samaritan who, at his own expense of time and money, cares for a stranger who had fallen among thieves. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says that we will be held accountable about how we feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, care for the sick, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger.

In our New Testament lesson today, we hear a story of hospitality from the book of Acts. On the road to Damascus, Saul is blinded by his encounter with the Risen Lord. Saul, soon to be known as Paul, is led into the city, where he stays in a home. For three days, he does not eat or drink. Then, the Risen Lord speaks to a man named Ananias and tells him to go to Saul. Ananias is to lay his hands on Saul and restore his sight. Ananias is afraid. He has heard how Saul has arrested the followers of Jesus and delivered them to the authorities in Jerusalem. Saul is a dangerous man. He is the enemy of the church. Yet, Ananias overcomes his fear. At great risk to himself, he goes to Saul and restores his sight. The only way we can comprehend such courageous acts of hospitality is to understand that Christian hospitality springs from gratitude.

Dr. Christine Pohl of Asbury Theological Seminary has written a book on Christian hospitality entitled "Making Room." I am indebted to Dr. Pohl's thoughts for much of this sermon. Pohl writes, "Hospitality is central to the meaning of the gospel" (p. 8). Christian hospitality is rooted in how God has welcomed us and how God has provided for our needs. The people of ancient Israel knew that they had been strangers who wandered the earth and they had a special calling to practice hospitality toward strangers. Just as God fed them with bread in the wilderness, so too were they called to share their bread with the poor. In gratitude to God, they cared for the weak, the poor and the resident aliens. In the life of Jesus, we see how he was both host and guest. He extended hospitality to strangers and he received the hospitality of others. He fed the hungry multitudes and ate in the homes of known sinners. Pohl notes that one of the New Testament words for hospitality means "the love of the stranger." (p. 31) The death of Jesus on the cross for our salvation is the ultimate symbol of God's hospitality. Through his saving death, we are welcomed into the Kingdom of God. Therefore, Paul says in Romans 15:7, we are to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us.

When we practice the grace of hospitality, we discover unexpected blessings. We meet God in the stranger. Abraham has no way of knowing that his three guests are messengers from God. The angels tell him that Sarah will conceive and bear a son. The idea is so absurd that Sarah laughs out loud but God gets the last laugh. In due time, she gives birth to Isaac, whose name means "laughter." There is no way that Ananias can imagine how the Lord will use Saul to bring the gospel to the gentiles. He cannot see what will come from his courageous act of hospitality. He cannot see how these apostles will transform an empire. He simply trusts God and overcomes his fear and dread.

Have we not also experienced the same thing? When we extend ourselves to give our time and attention to the stranger or to the person in need, we often find ourselves to be the ones who have received the blessings. The nights I have served in homeless shelters, I have felt God's presence in ways that I have not experienced within the comforts of my own home. In Victor Hugo's epic novel, *Les Miserables*, a bishop's act of hospitality to the former prisoner, Jean Valjean, sets in motion the redemptive theme of the entire story. Those who serve as tutors and mentors in the after-school program at Westminster Neighborhood Ministries know what a blessing it is to work with at-risk children. Each one of us here could testify to how God has blessed us through the experience of practicing hospitality by visiting in nursing homes, volunteering at the hospital, participating in Care Corps, participating in a prison ministry, distributing home communion or going on a mission trip. We can never overestimate the power of simple acts of hospitality practiced in a spirit of faith, hope and love. When we take the time to get to know someone we do not know, open our hearts to one another and welcome that person into our community of faith, we are certain to meet Christ. Jean Vanier has written, "Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share." (Community and Growth, p. 266, quoted in *Making Room*, p.160).

Our Strategic Planning Task force considered many ways of describing our community of faith. They considered the words: caring, inviting, loving, diverse, committed and countless others. Ultimately, in framing our new mission statement, the Task Force was led to the

word "welcoming." A welcoming community is faithful to the great commission of Jesus which calls us to make disciples. We make disciples by inviting new persons into the community of faith and teaching them what it means to follow Jesus. To be a welcoming community is to be a community that is open to new people, new mission and new ideas. A welcoming community is a community that is willing to be transformed by the spirit of God as we encounter Christ in the stranger. A welcoming community constantly enlarges its circle of love and grace. To be welcoming means not only to open the doors to the world beyond the church, but also to have a more engaging, inviting attitude toward many who are already in the church but may not feel like they are a vital part of the community of faith.

One of our elders wrote that there is another way of being the church than simply being comfortable with who we are. She wrote, "It's a much harder way. It's the way of inclusion. But if we want to walk in that way, to make room at our Lord's Table for all sorts of people with all sorts of backgrounds and approaches to their faith, we have to be prepared to make room in our own lives and hearts for ideas, attitudes, and needs that we have not heretofore recognized. We have to open ourselves to conflict and pain...we have to be willing to listen - really listen - to the thoughts and experiences of others...and we must learn to know in our own hearts that we do not have to be alike to be one in the Body of Christ."

Second Presbyterian Church is a welcoming community of faith that opens its doors to the community; we share our resources with those in need; we open our hearts to people who are struggling, lost, confused, in pain and lonely. As we practice the grace of hospitality, we find ourselves more and more in the presence of the Lord. As we sit in the shelter of this sanctuary, walk down the street in Indianapolis, hang out at school, drive in our cars or rush about in our places of work, who knows what holy strangers God may send our way?