

Luke 10: 29-37

The Discipline of Hospitality

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is hospitality. We started this series with a sermon on Abraham and Sarah who set the gold standard when it comes to hospitality. There at the beginning of the Bible – 4000 years ago – this patriarch and his wife welcomed three strangers with a lavish feast of freshly baked bread, cool water, savory meat and curds with honey. Seeing them arrive in the heat of the day, Abraham stopped what he was doing, welcomed the strangers into his tent, washed their dusty feet, and instructed his servants to prepare a feast with care. He chose the best flour and personally found a tender calf. Though Abraham and Sarah's hospitality sets the bar in the Bible, and Abraham and Sarah were not the only gracious people in the Bible. Lot welcomed strangers and Rebekah did too. When he fled from Egypt, Moses was invited to dine with the priest of Midian when he arrived in that far-off land. Nehemiah was a great host to his fellow Jews. The stories of Jesus are full of examples of lavish meals hosted in his honor. Jesus was welcomed in to the house of Simon Peter, Mary and Martha, and the Pharisees. All the disciples were treated to similar hospitality. The Centurion, Cornelius, invited Peter to join him and his family for a great feast. Indeed the early Christians established their reputation as people who set an open table that welcomed rulers and widows alike. The Bible has over 8000 examples of hospitality. Indeed one of the signs of good character was the reputation as a gracious host.

The Bible says that God appreciates our efforts to be generous, especially to strangers. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Story of the Good Samaritan. You may remember that Jesus told about a man walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers jumped out

of the caves in that region and assaulted this man. They robbed him, stripped him of everything valuable, and left him for dead by the side of the road. By chance a priest was going down the road, and when he saw the man lying in the ditch he passed by on the other side of the road. Before long a Levite came down the same road, and when he noticed the man lying next to the road he also passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveling on that same road saw the man who had been beaten and took pity on him. He dressed his wounds and bandaged them. Lifting the victim onto his own animal, the Samaritan took him to an inn, where he spent the night nursing him. The next day he gave the innkeeper a sum equal to two days wages, and instructed the innkeeper to take care of the man, promising to settle his bill on his return trip. What can we learn from this famous story about hospitality for our lives today?

In the first place, hospitality is a way of life. It is a lifelong discipline, not an afterthought. Seeing this man in the ditch, the Samaritan was unusual, because he stopped. Though he had other things to do, and places to be, he took time to help. The Samaritan did what the Priest and Levite were too busy to do.

Why do some people stop while others press on? Why do some folks put their plans on hold while others stay their course? Why do some people stop to help while others go to the other side of the road? In my experience it is hard to make a decision like this on the spot. You have to think about hospitality long before you are called upon to show it.

Hood Milk Company decided to put trucks on the road that they called the Hood Samaritan. The company paid to put vehicles out designed to troll the Boston highways looking for folks who had broken down and needed roadside assistance. They may have decided to allocate resources and find trucks to help strangers because they believed it was good for publicity, but part of what made the service effective was that they had allocated resources for this outreach beforehand. They were ready to help strangers because they had made a commitment to do so. Real hospitality is not an afterthought. It takes forethought.

There is a story in the Old Testament about a Shunnamite woman who saw the prophet Elisha passing through her community. She watched him coming and going and recognized that he was a holy man who needed a place to stay. So she told her husband that they should build a guest room on their house so that Elisha might stay with them as he traveled. For her, hospitality is not the occasional good deed, but the ability to make space in her life for others. It is the ability to anticipate another's needs and the decision to set aside time and resources to welcome the stranger. You prepare for hospitality long before you find someone who needs it. You start thinking about hospitality before you meet the stranger on your path.

That is what St. Benedict did. Benedict of Nursia lived 1500 years ago. Europe was reeling from the breakdown of the Roman Empire. Rome was a tyranny, and its armies were ruthless, but Roman rule also brought stability to Europe which lasted for 100 years. So in the Middle Ages when Rome fell, Europe was cast into a time of economic and political confusion. Roads that had once been safe were now frequented by bandits who began to systemically attack travelers. Ordinary men and women had good reason to distrust strangers. Travelers made their way in fear. Benedict of Nursia started monasteries and convents that welcomed travelers, and offered them shelter.

The Benedictines reminded people that hospitality is the best antidote to fear. Benedict understood that the only way to transform his society was not to insulate people from outsiders, but to teach people to trust that even strangers are children of God. Benedict changed the world by making hospitality a way of life. For him it was a discipline.

Secondly, hospitality is humbling. You don't fix the life of a stranger. It is not about a grand gesture, but an open heart. It is not about saving someone or saving the day. It is about lending a hand. The Samaritan stopped to help. That was good enough. The next day he continued on his way. He did not quit his job to start a foundation that would make the road safe. He did not give up his career to be a vigilante and track down the bandits. He dressed a

stranger's wound and offered to put him up in an inn. Sometimes we imagine that God wants us to fix the world, when all God needs is for us to do what we can. We don't need to play God; we need to serve God. The Good Samaritan did what he could and that was enough. He carried that man for a week, and then God took it from there.

The hotline named for him is called The Samaritans. It is a resource for people who are deeply depressed and feeling desperate. Staffed by volunteers who don't pretend to save anybody, but often do, their purpose is to offer a listening ear and to communicate that the caller is not alone. 24 hours a day their confidential non-judgmental hotline has saved many lives. It is an example of how one small step to extend human connections and genuine open-hearted hospitality can make a difference.

Annie Dillard writes, "The way we spend our days is the way we spend our lives." Small efforts, done consistently define our life's work. God can use even our inadequate gestures of kindness to make a big difference.

Finally, Hospitality bends the arc of history towards justice.

In Thursday's Boston Globe there was a short story about a Medford mom known for her Facebook rants. The latest one to gain attention was her mean message to college students who come to Boston. With expletives and ad hominem attacks, she gave voice to her frustration at the students who have come to town. Her humor was degrading and toxic as she attacked what she perceived as their sense of entitlement. Lots of people thought her rant was funny.

The Bible came into a world where it was the norm to make the stranger your enemy. In our worst moments we are all just a few steps away from the kind of barbarism this Medford mom gave voice to. People went down that road in Nazi Germany, in Rwanda, and in Nigeria under Boko Haram and in Iraq under ISIS. The opposite of cruelty or open hostility in this world is not simply freedom from a cruel person or relationship; it is hospitality. Hospitality has this

inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not just a social grace, but it is an ethical stand.

Hospitality saved lives in Nazi Germany; sometimes it was the only thing that did. Hospitality saved the lives of Salvadoran refugees in the 1980's as church volunteers created underground railroads to shelter and transport. Hospitality guides volunteers from a UCC Church south of Tucson when they go out into the desert and fill up water buckets for refugees traveling the scorching trails all night fleeing drug cartels and violence we can hardly imagine. They fill water stations in the desert, to fewer people will die of thirst.

Jesus says that we do God's work when we treat people from other countries, other classes, other walks of life as children of the same God. It is as subversive now as it was then.

Hospitality is the ability to say : They are not street people; they are human beings. They are not AIDS or Ebola patients; they are human beings. They are not illegal aliens; they are human beings. They are not crazy people; they are human beings.

Like many of you, my heart was touched and tortured in turns by stories this summer about tens of thousands of children coming across our border into Texas from Central America. Mostly from Honduras where they are fleeing neighborhoods so dangerous that loving parents sent them on these impossible journeys hoping and praying they connect with family members already working in this country. The UCC has been in the forefront of advocacy efforts, calling for legal reforms and translators for children way too young to navigate the immigration process alone. But this crisis challenges us to respond to these children, not as strangers but as children of God. A Catholic Bishop from Seattle Eusebio Elizondo wrote an op ed piece in the Washington Post in August saying that how we treat these children says a lot about who we are and what our real values are.

Jesus told a now famous story about a man who had been beaten and robbed. One man's kindness inspires us and challenges us... even today.