

Matthew 10: 40-42

**Theology of Hospitality**

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This summer my spouse and I visited a number of National Parks in Canada and the US. One of the last parks we visited was Glacier National Park (GNC). If you have ever been south of the Canadian Rockies, you know that the area is pretty desolate, and finding accommodations can be a difficult task.

So, on our way to GNP we ended up at a place called Glacier Haven Motel and Campground. It was located in the middle of nowhere, situated between the highway in front of our door and very active train tracks in back of our room. When the first train rolled by for about 10 minutes we just looked at each other and knew – it was a night for the heavy-duty earplugs and the sound machine set on the highest noise level.

The motel was run by a very sweet family – husband, wife, teenage son and daughter. We got there late but that did not deter them from being incredibly kind and welcoming. As we checked in I saw a sign by the doors, saying: “You may enter as strangers but you will leave as friends.”

Honestly, signs like that make me a little cynical. This is a motel; you do this to earn money not to make friends. But this motel was different. It was late when we arrived. We changed rooms which meant that they had to show us the options in the rain and in the dark. In the morning, the kids joined us for breakfast. Living in the middle of nowhere and being homeschooled, they were hungry to talk to people. And once they found out that Jamie is a teacher and I a minister, they were all over us. They wanted to know about our lives and vice versa.

We found out that dad had been a minister and police officer before buying the motel and campground. As a family they had lived in Latin America and done Missionary work. And now this motel was their mission – not just to make money during the short summer weeks that would last them for the rest of the year, but for it to be a place where strangers are welcomed and would leave as friends. Somehow this family managed to do that.

This month we are talking about hospitality. While Susan read the book “Radical Hospitality” along with the series, I read a book by Christine Pohl called “Making Room – Recovering Hospitality as Christian Tradition”. It is a very comprehensive and interesting book, and it’s on its way to being a reference book on hospitality.

From the reading and studying of Holy Scriptures, I trust that by now we have realized that hospitality is and should be deeply imbedded in our spiritual DNA. It is closely linked to our faith journey and how we live out our faith in this world. Both Testaments tell us that we are to welcome the stranger, to take care of them, to feed them, house them, invite them into our lives, and, if they are travelers, send them on their way better equipped than before they came to us. In the world we live in, this is easier said than done.

In our lives, we all have been at the giving end of hospitality. We all have been (or tried to be) gracious hosts and hostesses Martha Stewart would be proud of, welcoming family and friends into our homes. And we all have been on the receiving end of hospitality. We have been in situation when we felt warmly welcomed and made to feel at home, and we have been in situations where we could not wait to get out.

The same can be said about the church. I am sure we all have visited churches that welcomed us or ignored us, and we, in our church, have had many discussions on how to practice hospitality on a consistent basis.

We know that offering hospitality is work, hard work. And hospitality can be risky business if the guest list includes people we don’t know.

So, why consider hospitality? It is not very practical – cost money, takes effort, can be dangerous, there is no reward at the end. Why do it?

Simply for the fact that hospitality lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. Hospitality lies at the heart of how we live out our faith, and how we make faith real to the world. Our faith is personal, yes, but not private. Only by practicing hospitality, by receiving others into our own homes, church and community can we receive them as we would receive Christ himself. In giving *ourselves* to those who come into our lives we share Christ himself – the one who has sent us – with them. It also reflects how close we want to get to Christ, or how much room we make for God in our lives by practicing hospitality. And that is the theological meaning of hospitality.

The scripture reading is just about that:

<sup>40</sup>“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

<sup>41</sup>Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; <sup>42</sup>and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

These verses come at the end of Jesus' missionary discourse to his disciples (10:5-42). Up to this point, Jesus has been talking about what the disciples should do and the difficulties that they will face - what others will do to them because of their witness for Christ. Jesus teaches them about hospitality in the context of discipleship.

These verses speak about Hospitality as receiving and welcoming the stranger. Jesus reminds them and us of a very profound privilege, and, along with that, a tremendous responsibility. He tells us that we represent and symbolize him before others. He tells us that the reverse is also true: namely, that others represent and symbolize him before us.

Jesus assures us that he himself is present in our lives when we welcome others into our midst. He is also present when others do the same for us.

Jesus is present each and every day in the hospitality that we offer others and others offer us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it very well in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*:

"The bearers of Jesus' word receive a final word of promise for their work. They are now Christ's fellow workers, and will be like him in all things. Thus they are to meet those to whom they are sent as if they were Christ himself. When they are welcomed into a house, Christ enters with them. They are bearers of his presence. They bring with them the most precious gift in the world, the gift of Jesus Christ."

"And with them they bring God the Father, and that means indeed forgiveness and salvation, life and blessing. That is the reward of their toil and suffering. Every service people give them is service provided to Christ himself."

Think about it: we bring Christ before others in our homes, in the church, in school, at work, at play, in the whole world. This is huge! This is serious stuff!

What would happen if, every day, we were always conscious of this truth and did our best to put it into practice? When we offer and receive hospitality Jesus is made present. This truly is the most precious gift we could give to anyone!

Most of us probably don't find it too difficult to offer hospitality to our family and friends, but what about the stranger - the youth playing basketball or hockey on our parking lot, the neighbor we meet across the back lane, the immigrant family picking up diapers from Baby Basics, the father or mother seeking help for their family here at the church? How often do we welcome these and similar people who have fallen through the cracks or who are labeled outcasts in our society? Do we give them the gift of Christ's presence? Or do we say to ourselves, they've got their own people (or agencies) who look out for them? I don't want to mess with them...

Theologian, Kosuke Koyama, was correct when he observed: "Our society, even the religious community, works on the basis of mutual invitation – same religious, social, economic, etc. background( Lutherans invite Lutherans, Congregationalists invite Congregationalists, etc.).

As long as we conduct ourselves in such a way, we have the convenience of speaking our own religious and cultural language. Intellectually and spiritually we live comfortably. But Jesus is not enthusiastic about it.

The real meaning of hospitality (which is also the historical one) is found in inviting someone who cannot repay you, someone who is unfamiliar to you. Then the concept of invitation ~ hospitality ~ receives a Christ related meaning. Christ is the Hospitality of God toward us. God invites all of us, from all languages and cultures, to God's great banquet, the feast which none of us can repay." (Article "If you give a Feast, Invite the Poor", Christian Century, August 16-23, 1998, p. 747)

Christ is God's hospitality toward us. In Christ, God comes to us as fully human, showing that God is and wants to be part of our lives. And in Christ, God lets us know that we are fully received and accepted as we are. In Christ we experience both sides of the coin of God's hospitality toward us.

Church growth experts say that healthy and growing congregations are generally friendly churches that offer hospitality to others. They are churches that live by the principle that, *there are no strangers here, only friends whom we have not met.*

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To be faithful disciples and to represent God's heartbeat in our lives we need to push the boundaries of what we find comfortable and easy. I think that we work hard on this as a community of faith with our community dinners, lunches, sponsoring and hosting the immigration taskforce and their activities, nurturing our partnership with our partner village, running VBS, and welcoming everyone to our communion table and into the life of the church.

You may be thinking to yourself, "It's one thing to invite strangers to the church, but a totally different thing to invite strangers into our homes." It is hard for many of us... I'll be the first one to admit that. It is hard because our society has conditioned us to fear the stranger without exception.

To be faithful disciples, we need to push the boundaries of what we find comfortable and easy. So, the next time you give or receive hospitality, remember to rejoice in the other person's presence no matter if you know the person or meet them for the first time; remember that it may very well make all the difference in the world to the person who receives your hospitality. And remember the reverse is also true; someone may be the very presence of Christ for you in an unexpected time and place. Amen