

Rev. Heike Werder  
Luke 10: 38-42

### **“Lessons in Hospitality”**

In January of 1990 after the fall of the Berlin wall Erich Honecker, the the brutal and hated dictator of East Germany, found himself sick and homeless. So despised were he and his wife Margot, who was the minister of Education, that no one could be found to provide them shelter, not even their daughter.

Someone contacted Pastor Uwe Holmer who directed the church-run convalescent center Hoffnungsthaler Deaconal Institution in the village of Lobetal near Berlin. Pastor Holmer was a member of the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg (which is my home church), and had bitter memories of Honecker and his regime. Honecker had personally presided over the building of the wall, the wall that separated Holmer's family and kept him from attending his own father's funeral. He had even greater reason to resent Honecker's wife, who ran the East German ministry of education. Eight of Holmer's ten children had been denied admission to any university because of their faith.

So it should have been easy for Pastor Holmer to turn Honecker and his wife away. But instead, this Christian pastor and his wife took into their home the very couple who had done so much to persecute their church and make their own lives miserable. They even covered the costs of the ailing Honecker's care out of their own pockets.

The Honeckers left after 10 weeks, to stand trial for treason. Eventually they were allowed to leave Germany to live with one of their daughters in Chile. Erich Honecker died in 1993, but his wife is still going strong at 84 year of age.

When we think of welcome or hospitality, we don't think of it as offering our bitter enemies room and board for as long as they need it.

We probably most likely think of it as little more than entertaining guests – family, friends, and sometimes, strangers. We put food and drink on the table as a way of sharing our hearth and home with others. Sometimes we are blessed and filled by those to whom we have shown hospitality, and sometimes we just wish they would go home.

Offering hospitality can be both energizing and draining, depending on our mood, the personality of the guests, and the degree of perfection we try to achieve in what we offer. Are we going for finger food picnic with riparian entertainment or the white tie soiree a la Martha Stewart.

At its foundation, we know that hospitality is simply welcoming others into our space and sharing the simple things of food and conversation with them. But if it leaves us worn out, then, we may have not fully grasp the spiritual concept of hospitality that is meant to bring us closer to God.

So, I think to really understand the spiritual side of hospitality we have to back into it and remember when hospitality has been extended to us:

- When have we felt truly welcomed?
- When have we felt truly included?
- When have we been so blessed by someone's hospitality that our own heart overflowed with gratitude?

I grew up in a household where hospitality was practiced. Our door was always open. You dropped whatever you were doing, to pay attention to your guest(s). Nobody ever made an appointment. We welcomed guests from all over the world due to my aunt's teaching position at two of East Berlin's theological seminaries. She would invite student and visiting professors alike and bring them home, for a day or for the weekend.

In East Germany an open door was one way of connecting with the world, but it was also somewhat dangerous. You did not know if the person you welcomed into your home was a government informant, sent to spy on us. I am sure that some had a hidden agenda, but that was not in the forefront of our minds.

Growing up I learned what it meant to be welcoming and hospitable to people by practicing it on people we knew and people we did not know. But I really more deeply understood hospitality when I was the stranger myself.

I came to this country at the tender age of 24, and the first two people who offered me unconditional welcome were Jean and Dan Novotny, a retired minister and his wife. Jean actually came to visit us in Germany and accompanied me on my first flight over the big pond. I stayed with them at their house the four weeks before school began. They drove me to Bangor, and along the way, outfitted me with the

things a student needed – like my first computer. They took me to L.L. Bean in Freeport (I thought I had died and gone to heaven!) to buy me that warm winter coat I would need during the long Maine Winter. They welcomed me back to their house whenever I needed a place to stay during semester breaks, and offered the same hospitality to my family when they came for my graduation two years later. But they offered more than a place to sleep and place at their table. Conversation, advice, a home away from home is what they offered. They were an incredible couple.

They have been other who extended their unconditional welcome and hospitality to me: my friend Rosemary MacKay and her partner Janet, or June Millett and her sister Shirley, exceptional friends who enriched my life and have left their imprint on mine.

We understand hospitality best by reflecting on the most profound moments of hospitality offered to us, the simple and genuine ones. They may not have any connection whatsoever with food or drink or shelter. They may simply be moments when another person unexpectedly gathered us up into their circle of friendship, or accepted us as we were, or loved us in spite of ourselves.

Biblical speaking, the practice of hospitality is an obligation. Both, Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament say so. We are to welcome the stranger, give them food and shelter, give them all the help they need and require to make their journey safe. We know how well we do with fulfilling an obligation. We might do it, but our hearts are not in it.

At its core, hospitality is an opening of the heart. It really has very little to do with having friends or strangers over for dinner. Indeed, we can invite the poor into our homes for a meal three nights a week, but if our heart is not open, we have not offered hospitality. This is what makes many of us avoid hospitality as a spiritual practice. We got the obligation down, but not the spiritual practice.

Our scripture passage from Luke this morning is a classic story of hospitality. Jesus and his entourage headed for a certain village to take a needed break from their preaching, seeking temporary shelter and rest from their travels in what was unfriendly territory. They were met by one of Jesus' friends, a certain woman named Martha, the lady of the house. We don't know how many disciples descended upon Martha and Mary's house, but it seemed enough to get the hostess frustrated at the sight of her little sister, who decided to soak in what

Jesus had to say, rather than doing the dishes. When Martha complains to Jesus, he tells her to stop rushing and start listening, like Mary.

We can look at this story several ways: Jesus and Mary braking cultural and religious norms, or Jesus making a case feminist liberation, or Jesus endorsing the spiritual life over the practical chores. (I wonder of he would have thought that way if no dinner had appeared on the table that night.)

I'd like to suggest that it is actually a story of open heart hospitality and what it can do to people. Jesus, because of being an itinerant preacher could not offer hospitality in the traditional sense, and yet we know and love him for being the welcoming person he was.

He knew how to welcome people by opening his heart to them, by listening to them. He gathered them in by the thousands, listening to their problems, their dreams, the injustices done to them, their hopes that lie hidden in their souls, their joys that have taken them to heaven's door. All these things had become part of his heart as he practiced hospitality as a spiritual practice and not as an obligation. It seemed that Mary took advantage of that invitation to get a taste of that kind of hospitality. And he invited Martha to do the same.

The challenge of true hospitality is to merge the contents of our own hearts with those of our guests. This means that what is in our hearts is no longer front and center. It is not longer all about me. It becomes, instead, all about us.

It is, no doubt, a difficult shift to make. It is particularly difficult when the one we open our hearts to are completely unlike us. They may be different in background, have a different educational level, enjoy different foods, have a career that seems strange to us, wear clothes that are offensive to us, have tattoos or body piercings that unsettle us, or speak, think, act, or feel completely different from us.

It's much easier to have our favorite friends over for dinner and call it hospitality that it is to open our hearts to those who are different. It is even harder to then be asked to let the contents of their hearts merge with our own. Yet that is exactly the invitation that Christ-like hospitality offers us.

The paradox, of course, is that when we have the courage to fully open our hearts to those we love, those who are strangers, and to

those who are different from us, we find, that, in the name of God, they bless us and our lives and they are never the same again.

This open-heart hospitality is not a one-time thing. It needs consistent and regular practice, just like any other spiritual practice requires because it can be easily avoided. Not just is it important to open our doors and hearts, but to also step out, literally, into places where we've never been, meet people we've not met before, experience arenas of life that have been outside our familiar terrain. Hospitality is not just about gathering people in, but going where others are in order to open our hearts to them there.

This is easier for some than others. But if we simply remember how we felt when someone opened their heart to us, it won't be so difficult to do if for someone else.

Pastor Holmer's kindness toward the former head to the communist regime of East Germany was not shared by the rest of the country, not even by fellow Christians. Hate mail poured in and bomb threats were made. Some members of his own church threatened to leave or cut back their giving.

Pastor Holmer defended his actions in a letter to the newspaper. "In Lobetal," he wrote, "there is a sculpture of Jesus inviting people to himself and crying out, 'Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' We have been commanded by our Lord Jesus to follow him and to receive all those who are weary and heavy laden, in spirit and in body. What Jesus asked his disciples to do is equally binding for us." Amen