

## **A Case for Hospitality**

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What are the first thoughts that come to mind when you think about hospitality? Is it freshly folded towels and breakfast buffets at hotels, or a fancy dinner that you've prepared in your home for your closest friends? Is it signing up to be a host for "Mennonite Your Way?" or welcoming people at the door of our church. All of these are expressions of hospitality – but they are hospitality – just on the surface. Hospitality has deep wells and those who desire to know what lies within drink deeply.

Hospitality is not insisting on your own way, it is welcoming people, even those with whom we disagree. True hospitality can be uncomfortable, and it's not about making an impression – but about opening door of the heart – to invite Christ in.

I want to share with you some stories – some from the Bible and some from my own experiences – about learning the meaning of hospitality.

### **Story #1: Genesis 18:1-15**

Yahweh appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, "My lord, (with a lower case L) if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on-- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

<sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

As a nomad in the ancient Near East, Abraham knew the sacred rule of hospitality. It was more stringently kept than many written laws.

In the big wide world of the bronze age there were many dangers, and travelers were at risk. The rule of hospitality was that a guest would be treated with respect and honour. Water would be provided for foot washing and a large feast prepared. The traveler enjoyed protection from all enemies for three days as the host was to provide sanctuary. You can see this provision in part of Psalm 23 where the psalmist writes about God – 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.'

There are a few of things to consider in this story. First: We know from verse one that it was God who was visiting Abraham, but Abraham had no clue that it was God. When he used the words, 'My lord,' he uses a word with a small 'l' which is simply a term of respect.

Second: While there is no indication that Abraham knew it was God, there was a common belief among the ancients that a wandering stranger could be a deity or the servant of a deity. We read in Hebrews 13:2 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' Abraham was surprised when it turned out that God was his guest.

The third consideration is that Abraham did not greet the men by asking them their business. He was hospitable first. You see, hospitality was, and still is, an incredibly important practice in the Middle East, I would even go as far as to suggest around the world. In shame based cultures, to not be a good host is a serious insult to a guest, and an incredible disgrace to yourself. And our scriptures reflect that.

There is the Levitical command to "treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." In ancient times all strangers depended on someone else's hospitality. For the people of ancient Israel, understanding themselves as strangers and sojourners with responsibility to care for vulnerable strangers, was part of what it meant to be the people of God.

Story #2: Emily tells story of adventures in Northern Saskatchewan

Story #3 Then there's the story of Mary and Martha. We take our hosting cues from here. We all strive to be Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus, dreading to be the Martha who, in the background, is furiously working to provide for the unexpected Jesus.

And Jesus, who was dependent on the hospitality of others during much of his earthly journey, also served as the gracious host in his words and in his actions. He taught us simplicity, welcome, servanthood – by washing his disciples' feet. Those who turned to him found welcome and rest and the promise of welcome into the Kingdom.

Early Christians claimed that sharing meals, homes and worship with people from all sorts of different backgrounds, including their non-Christian neighbours was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith. Monasteries in the middle ages – were refuges for ALL people, regardless of status and state. A bed, a meal, safety.

For most of the history of the Christian church, the practicing of hospitality has enabled the practitioners to recognize the Christ in each person welcomed.

All Christians are, I believe, called to be hospitable. Yet for over 2 thousand years we still struggle to find better ways to respond to people who's life status makes us feel uncomfortable. "They're too noisy" and "they just want handouts, they're just lazy" and "they just take advantage of us".

Yet the practice of hospitality is still a spiritual discipline – and one that we are called to practice. In an uncaring world where many receive only rebuke and rejection, our little, unspectacular acts of hospitality and open generosity can make all the difference, and just may

be the only sign of the love of Christ that some other person experiences that day, that week or ever.

This is even more important these days where it seems that the only social interactions we get are by social media.

#### #4. **Matthew 9:9-13**

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus was walking along,  
he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth;  
and he said to him, "Follow me."  
And he got up and followed him.

And as Jesus sat at dinner in the house,  
many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

<sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples,  
"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

<sup>12</sup> But when Jesus heard this, he said,  
"Those who are well have no need of a physician,  
but those who are sick.

<sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means,  
'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'  
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Can you imagine the gossip. "I just saw a Rabbi eating dinner at Matthew the Tax Collector's house! What has this world come to?!"

In Jesus' culture, strict social norms said you couldn't eat or associate with someone who was unclean, and people who were non-Jews, Gentiles, were the most unclean of all.

This story reinforces the powerful message that Jesus gives about the kind of people and situations Jesus invests in. Collecting taxes for the despised Roman occupiers, operating a corrupt system and known for getting rich on the proceeds, tax collectors and their families were widely ostracized from mainstream Jewish society and worship.

Matthew was unclean by association, and to eat with him made Jesus unclean. But Jesus didn't care. The impact Jesus had upon Matthew was so great that Matthew's first thought was to hold "a great banquet for Jesus at his house" (Luke 5:29), inviting friends and work colleagues, all with the social status of "sinners."

And Jesus' attendance really offended the religious leaders of the day. Everything Jesus was doing was contrary to what the laws in the Torah proclaimed! And those against Jesus' actions took to the streets and the Facebook groups to criticize all that Jesus was doing.

And Jesus' response was simple: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"

We also need to learn what this means. Or perhaps re-learn or learn again or remember. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" Let us learn this well. I pray for us all to have opportunity to both witness unfettered kindness and hospitality and to act on what we know of God's love for the world.