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“Practicing Hospitality”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Gen. 18:1–15; Ps. 52; Col. 1:15–28; Lk. 10:38–42

Gracious God, when we were wandering aimlessly in the wilderness, when we were in exile, when we were seeking a savior, you reached out to us. You have welcomed us. Open our minds and hearts to receive you once again this morning, that hearing the Good News of the Gospel, we may believe and seek to follow Christ our Lord. In whose name we pray, Amen.

“I arrived in Durham as a young soldier stationed at Camp Butner at the beginning of World War II. I was alone, far away from home, afraid. Then I received an invitation to visit the First Presbyterian Church of Durham. I was welcomed by the pastor, Kelsey Regen, and the church hostess, Clara Matthis, and many of the wonderful members of that congregation. We worshipped together, we ate together, and we even danced together. I was no longer alone. I had found a new home.”¹

Every week in this building, all during the week and hopefully on Sunday, we welcome strangers to come to our doors for assistance, who come here to worship. This congregation has a long history of offering hospitality to strangers, reflected

¹ Clara Pugh Matthis, *The Unforgettable Years: A record of the activities of the First Presbyterian Church, Durham, North Carolina, during the war years, 1941-1945*, Durham: First Presbyterian Church, 1947.

in that story of a World War II soldier from Camp Butner. Just this weekend, we welcomed a youth group from Alpharetta, GA, who asked if they could come and stay here overnight on their way to a mission site.

Now I don't know about you, but I was raised on hospitality. Hospitality was as Southern as iced tea and grits. We were proud of the fact that we were hospitable people. "Y'all come to see us now, you hear?" was a refrain often heard in Southern conversations. I remember my confusion as a teenager when I came to realize that many Southern Presbyterian Churches refused to open their doors to African-Americans. What was this so-called Southern hospitality all about? "Was it only to be extended to certain people?" I wondered. "People who looked, acted, and thought like us?"

And then I learned that the Bible offers a different view of hospitality. It teaches us about a hospitality that welcomes all guests and strangers, and this is not just an addendum; this is not just something added on like we want to be a "friendly church," so we're going to invite people because that is in the best interest of how to grow our church. The practice of hospitality is at the very core of the Gospel. It is what God's relationship with us is about, and it is what God calls us to practice toward our neighbors. The people of Israel were told to show hospitality, not just to other Jews, but to "the stranger at your gate." Deuteronomy 10 says, "God... loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:17–19).

In a remarkable statement, the writer of Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2)." This business of practicing hospitality is central. Jesus

says it is one of the issues upon which we are going to be judged. In that great judgment scene in Matthew 25, Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, and he said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35). It was in taking the stranger in we have entertained our Lord Christ.

Over and over in the Bible, we are urged to extend hospitality to strangers who come among us. Scripture tells us that not only are we to show hospitality to guests, to people that we know, but that we are to show hospitality to people who we don't know. And in fact, they are one of the ways that God is with us.

Abraham and Sarah entertained three strangers. Sam read the story to us today, and they offered them bread, water, and a fine tender calf. The strangers reveal themselves as messengers from God, announcing, of all things, that Sarah, who had been barren, would give birth to a child in the spring. This elderly couple had given up on the promise of God that they would build a great nation. But in the message of the strangers, they heard God—God's promise kept.

So, why do we have to be reminded to show hospitality? Why do we have to lift it up and think about it as God's people? Shouldn't we say, “No problem! Let's be a welcoming congregation! It's a piece of cake! We'll welcome folks!”

As you know well, there are barriers. Fear raises its ugly head. We must be honest and say there is something about us that fears the stranger in our midst—someone who is not like us, who does not think or look like us. Creating space for the other is far from an easy task. We experience it here in our own congregation. We may extend a welcoming hand, but do we take the time and energy to get to know those among us who are different? If it is hard for us, what about what is going on in our

nation right now? What about all these strangers who come to our doors and our shores?

I was raised to learn a very important piece of poetry. I considered it poetry. I was told it was the bedrock of who we were as an American people. You remember it:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”²

Those are the words on the Statue of Liberty. It is the light we offer to the world. Yet every day in the paper, we read about people who say, “Tell ‘em to go home; they’re illegal. Get them out of here!” I am not suggesting that it is a simple issue. But it is one upon which we, as Christians, need to reflect seriously because the God we worship is the God who welcomed us as strangers, who brought us in, as Scripture says, “while we still were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Not because we deserved it or because we earned it, but simply because we were children of God who deserved to be treated decently. We need to work for public policy that reflects the deep and abiding value of hospitality which is at the core of the faith that we proclaim.

It is not just fear of the stranger that stands in our way. The second barrier is time. It takes time to practice hospitality. Time is something that none of us has enough of these days, or at least, that is what I am told. Some people have said to me,

² Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” in Barry Moreno, *The Statue of Liberty Encyclopedia*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 772.

“You know, Joe, you have too many things on your plate. You don’t have enough time.” Well, I say to them: “I am always busy; I’m doing the Lord’s work.” That’s the rationalization. But then I hurry out of the church door to a meeting and go right past a stranger who is standing there with a story to tell me, or rush away from a bedside chat before we got a chance to talk about what is on the person’s mind. I know, my plate is too full.

“You are busy with too many things” is what Christ said to Martha. Busy with too many things to take seriously the presence of the other, to get to know the other, risking encounter with the stranger, taking the time to share a meal. That is why we gather here at the church for fellowship dinners. It is why we gather in groups and share meals with each other. It is one thing to say, “I love you and God loves you. But I’ll never know who you really are. I’ll never take the time to learn about you, to learn about what your hopes and fears are.” Then caring as a community becomes superficial. It takes time to engage another. And you know, often when we do take the time to engage another, we find that Scripture is right once again: we’ve entertained, sometimes angels unaware, sometimes strangers who are messengers from God, or as Mary and Martha discovered, sometimes even the living Lord. When we welcome the stranger, it may be that we are welcoming the Lord Christ.

Every time we come to this table, the guest who is Christ becomes the host. He invites us to come as we are, to come simply trusting him, trusting his love. And then some remarkable things are repeated that he has said to us. “This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat. This is the cup of forgiveness. Take and drink from it.” Friends, we have been welcomed and loved and nourished by the genuine

hospitality of our Lord! The least we can do is to practice it with others. Don't you agree? I hope so!