

The Sacred Work of Hospitality

Matthew 10:40-42

June 26, 2011

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[Jesus said:] "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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; 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."

This passage from Matthew's gospel comes after a lot of chapters of Jesus telling his disciples to proclaim the good news and that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Today's conclusion gives us, in succinct fashion, a very simple and very clear call to the Christian work of hospitality. What does the kingdom of heaven look like, and what are we to do to usher it in? We read that "even a cup of cold water," will do the trick. A really interesting thing is that this invitation to hospitality is being presented, as one source says, from "both sides of the table." This scripture tells the story of Jesus sending the disciples out, instructing them to offer good works of hospitality: "proclaim the good news, cure the sick, cast out demons..." AND he is also instructing them about how they may be received: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." (10:14). You see, "hospitality was an

imperative of biblical times for all people. A host was honor bound to provide certain hospitality to strangers, such as offering food and water, opportunity to wash. (You can imagine how important that was in an era before Marriott and Best Western.) Not to offer hospitality was considered the most shaming of social errors and a great sin.”

Hospitality. It seems like a “no-brainer.” And yet sometimes, perhaps we need to be reminded, or perhaps inspired a bit by stories of hospitality. ... I happen to have a few right here!

I love the thought that the invitation to hospitality is presented from “both sides of the table;” that it is offered, and in the offering, received. Listen to this story about a conversation that takes place around a table at a mission lunch being served in a town community hall by a local Bible study group:

“I know what you people are up to.” Ryan looked up from his lunch plate and into my eyes. He said it simple, yet as if in on a conspiracy. I asked, “What do you mean?” “For months, I’ve been coming to this lunch,” he continued, “trying to figure out who you people are and why you’re doing this. He paused. “You’re not from a church. You don’t talk about God or the Bible. You just smile and serve all this food week after week.” He paused again. “But then I figured it out.” I smiled back and waited to hear what mystery Ryan had solved about why we were

there. We smiled and waited, as if naming it aloud would somehow take away from the truth we both knew. Finally, Ryan said, “You’re doing this because Jesus said you’d find him among the poor, and you’re looking for Jesus.” (SoS) Both sides of the table.

Next story--

Earlier this month, as you may know, I had a wonderful opportunity to be away, at a conference center near Buffalo, NY, for a study leave program called, “Credo,” which was hosted by our denomination’s Board of Pensions. While there for study and reflection, I, along with 32 other pastors, were the recipients of very gracious hospitality. Part way through our work, we were given the gift of an evening out at a place called the Roycroft Mansion. As we toured this building before dinner, we noticed a quote engraved into one of the large, wooded doors, that was very meaningful. (Actually, it kind of leapt out at us) Before I tell you what it said, I want to tell you about Elbert and Alice Hubbard, to whom it is attributed. Elbert was a writer and philosopher who founded the Roycroft arts and crafts community in 1895, in E. Aurora, NY, near Buffalo. His wife, Alice, contributed to the support of this community and was considered to be a bit of a feminist in her day. Both died aboard the Lusitania in 1915, and their words quoted in an obituary said this: “It is the paradox of the world. The more you take out of your own affection and give to others, the more you have left. There is no such thing as pumping the

heart dry. You may pump any well dry; but out of the well of your affection, the more you give the more you have left. It is the paradox; it is the miracle, it is the Divine itself.” The wise words that are engraved on the door of the mansion are these: “The love you liberate in your work is the love you keep.” Again, hospitality from both sides of the table.

Today’s scripture asks us to consider how we live our lives; how we welcome one another; how we welcome Christ in those around us. It can be as simple as “even a cup of water,” ... or perhaps as a cup of coffee offered by the many Newport folks who have chipped in to take a turn hosting coffee hour, or as the meals we’ve prepared and received in times of need, a friendly hello to a visitor here in this sanctuary who does not know a soul, assistance with housing or medical bill, support of interfaith relationships.... You all know that there are many ways we offer hospitality, many yet unnamed here.

The question is, what is the “cup of cold water” that you have to offer, and when you think about it, who are those to whom you can give it? Family, friends, acquaintances, those whom you have not yet met, the “stranger” of whom you’ve been afraid? It’s a very compelling call to do the work of the gospel, and when we stop to think about it, there are myriad ways in which to live out this call.

John listens to a show called, “Radiolab,” on NPR and told me about a very interesting show called, “A Bus to Nowhere.” In this digital age, I went to my computer to listen to the broadcast days later, and now end with this story to inspire your creativity and thinking toward offering hospitality – the work of God’s reign.

The piece is called “A Bus to Nowhere,” in which a small and subtle shift and a reframing of existence, and I believe – hospitality, at a senior housing center in Dusseldorf, Germany, has peace-giving effects.

This home has a population of residents with dementia, who quite often have great stress over not knowing where they are, or over needing to get home or to work or to some setting from the past. Occasionally, a worried resident will escape the eye of their caregivers, and wander out in search of home or work or family. It causes a lot of concern as you can imagine.

One day, Mr. Gerbel – from the advisory board of the center – brings an idea to the board: an idea “ so simple, that you can’t imagine it would work.” The board’s first thought was that it was ridiculous; their second thought was that maybe it wasn’t bad. The idea? Build a bus stop in front of the home – a bus stop to nowhere. Now keep in mind the idea of hospitality here. While the staff had to explain to the neighbors that it wasn’t a real bus stop, let me tell you about how it

helped the residents of the home. The therapy of the “bus stop to nowhere” began to work when one resident had an “episode” where she needed to get home.

Explaining to a person with dementia that this was a past memory does not work, and usually leads to the patient becoming agitated and inconsolable. Imagine the alternative - the caregiver allowed the resident to go and sit at the bus stop in order to “get home” – in the fresh air and sunshine and peace, where the stress of having to “get home” slowly melts away. After a while, the need to go is forgotten and the nurse invites this woman in for a cup of tea.

Another resident is mentioned in this story – the man who still gets up at 2am every day to go and start baking at his bake shop. Instead of fighting it, the staff has invited him down into the kitchen where he happily participates in kitchen preparations. These accommodations they say, allow people to be “lost in their memories and yet to exist safely in the present.”

“Even a cup of cold water...”

The love that Jesus proclaimed and acted on often did not make sense to those around him. And that is where the grace of God was most evident. I hope these stories will help each one of us to consider the cups of water we might offer, and in so doing, bring the circle of God’s grace full around.

Amen.