

Hospitality, Another Word for Grace June 20, 2014

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Matthew 10:40 “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 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; 42 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.”

## HOSPITALITY IN DETROIT

Do you what was the best part of my General Assembly experience? It was the hospitality of the people of Detroit.

I know. You’ve heard bad things about Detroit, and they do have some big problems.

But, that’s not the whole story. They welcomed us with open arms. Volunteers from the Detroit Presbytery worked tirelessly to make our stay pleasant and enjoyable. The people who worked in the service industries were to a man and woman hard working and pleasant.

And, I’m happy to say, the members of the General Assembly appreciated their efforts. Even before the Assembly started, we were encouraged to tip generously while in Detroit. And some of the folks who served us said that we were some of the nicest people to come their way for a convention.

It might seem like a little thing to us, but hospitality is a big thing. In fact, this morning I’m going to make the case that hospitality is just another word for grace.

## THE REASON FOR HOSPITALITY

Why should we be hospitable to someone that we don’t know? In the Hebrew Bible the answer was plain. Hospitality was more than just being nice to strangers. Hospitality was a way of giving thanks for God’s salvation.

For example, in Exodus 22:21 we read, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

God’s people knew what it meant to be slaves in a foreign land. They knew what it meant to be rejected and persecuted. God saved them from that and gave them a land of their own.

Therefore, God’s people had a duty to be hospitable toward the resident aliens, the foreigners who had come to live with them in the Promised Land. Their life together was a reflection of their theology.

And the same is true for us today. The God who ransomed Israel, the God of love and grace revealed in Jesus Christ calls us to be hospitable to one another.

## GIVING HOSPITALITY

Visitors to the church often decide whether they want to come back based upon the welcome they receive. If they perceive a congregation to be open and welcoming they will come back. If they perceive a congregation to be closed and self-centered it will be hard for that visitor to come back.

Now obviously how welcoming any particular congregation may be varies from week to week. Some of you have told me that you have come to this church because you have found it to be a welcoming place.

On the other hand some have told me (fortunately not too often) that they felt this church was cold and distant. And that old saw about never getting a second chance to make a first impression is true.

Being hospitable is something all of us can practice every week. We can warmly welcome each other and we can welcome the stranger among us. It’s about more than just being nice or friendly. It’s a reflection of who we are called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ.

## RECEIVING HOSPITALITY

Now that’s the easy part of hospitality, giving it. But, the Bible also teaches us that we are to seek the hospitality of others. Hospitality is not a one-way street. I asked my Bible study this week what was easier: to be hospitable toward someone or to receive someone’s hospitality.

It wasn't even close. Everyone enjoyed being hospitable. But, many were reluctant to receive the hospitality of others.

When we ask for and receive the hospitality of others we put ourselves in a vulnerable position. When we ask for and receive the hospitality of others we say upfront that we do not have all that we need. We humble ourselves by having to rely upon the "kindness of strangers."

We put ourselves at risk when we rely upon the kindness of strangers.

We think that it's better to be independent. It's better to play the role of a good host instead of relying upon the hospitality of others.

But, the New Testament won't let us think that way. When Jesus sent his disciples to preach the gospel, he insisted that they rely upon the kindness of strangers.

It was a dangerous assignment. They were like lambs in the midst of wolves.

But, Jesus told them to carry no purse, no bag and no sandals. Their ministry would be totally dependent upon the kindness of strangers.

If the disciples, were welcomed they would have the opportunity to preach the gospel, and heal the sick.

But, if they were rejected, the disciples were called to shake the dust off of their feet and move on.

(Luke 10:1-10)

## HOSPITALITY AND JUDGMENT

That's the dark side of hospitality. Hospitality refused can bring about judgment.

Last week when we were debating how to address the situation in the Middle East, someone said in that part of the world when someone offers you his or her hand in friendship, the worst insult possible is to not take that hand and shake it.

In the New Testament refusing to offer hospitality and refusing to receive hospitality brings judgment.

One of the clearest examples of this can be found in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. The scene is the last judgment, and Jesus is separating the sheep from the goats.

And how does Jesus make that judgment? He makes that judgment on the basis of hospitality given or hospitality refused.

When we welcome the stranger, when we feed the hungry, when we tend to the sick, and when we visit the prisoner, we experience the very presence of Christ.

And when we refuse to do those things, we separate ourselves from the presence of Christ.

## HOSPITALITY AND LOVE FOR ALL

In the early church love and hospitality were often mentioned together. For example, in Paul's letter to the Romans we read,

“Let love be genuine ... love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor ... contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” (Romans 12:9-13)

Note that hospitality in the early church had a dual focus. Christians were encouraged to contribute to the needs of the saints and outdo one another in showing honor, but also they were asked to extend hospitality to strangers. Hospitality kept the Christian community together and hospitality was a way of reaching out and touching strangers in the name of Christ.

We see this important “hospitality dynamic” in the creation of the church. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost and they preached the gospel boldly, thousands joined the church. And three things marked the life of that early church: they worshipped together, they ate together and they shared what they had with each other.

The world took notice. The early church gained favor in the eyes of the people because the church provided what the world needed, a community filled with grace and truth. Hospitality was not just about being nice to one another. Hospitality was about experiencing the presence of God through the community of faith.

As the writer of the book of Hebrews put it, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained

angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:1-2) To put it another way, we are connected to heaven through acts of hospitality.

## HOSPITALITY AND FORGIVENESS

And it is through hospitality that sins are forgiven and God’s people are gathered together.

In this regard I point to the Lord’s Supper. Note that the words of institution point toward hospitality. But, this time the hospitality spoken about is not the hospitality of human beings but the hospitality of God.

People come from all over, from the north and the south and the east and the west to sit at table in God’s kingdom. The invitation to the table is not limited by race or national origin or any of the other divisions that divide human beings. It is a blanket invitation. All can come.

It is not our table. It is the Lord’s Table. And our Lord invites all who trust in his name to share the feast that he has prepared.

This past week a friend told of taking communion at General Assembly. And as he stood in line to receive the bread dipped in the wine, he realized that the woman who was serving communion was the mother of his former wife.

The situation must have seemed very awkward at first. But, the former mother in law did not respond with a scowl or anger. Instead, she smiled and gladly offered the bread and the wine to her former son in law.

And he said that with tears streaming down his face he understood in a deeper way the meaning of communion. Forgiveness, body broken and blood shed took on a “flesh and blood” meaning for him that day.

In order for the Christian message to have any meaning it must be proclaimed in a flesh and blood context. Hospitality is a flesh and blood way of saying,

“God has been so good to me that I can’t help but try to be that way toward others. Even the deepest divide can be overcome by a cup of cold water given in the name of our Lord.”

## EVEN A CUP OF COLD WATER

The last line of our lesson for today really spoke to me. Jesus said, "... 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."

What a little thing to do, to give a cup of cold water. Jesus emphasized this fact by his use of the word "even." We often imagine that following Jesus entails great feats and huge sacrifice. And sometimes that is exactly what is required.

But, at other times discipleship is nothing more than giving a cup of cold water to someone who needs it. Discipleship is giving a hug to someone who is overcome with grief. Discipleship is listening to someone who needs a friend. Discipleship is volunteering at the local food bank ... and so forth.

You get the idea. Discipleship doesn't have to be heroic. It just has to be a small, flesh and blood expression of God's love as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

These small acts of forgiveness and compassion tend to go unnoticed by the world and even by us when we do them. But, the life of faith is made up of small things like this. The reality of faith depends upon the culmination of a thousand small gestures.

Some of you may remember Loren Eiseley's story of the "the star thrower." It's about the guy tossing starfish after starfish back into the sea. When asked why he was doing it, he replied that if these starfish don't get back into the water soon, they'd dry out and die.

Looking at a beach strewn with thousands of starfish the interrogator responds that surely his gesture can't make any difference. And the man responds, "To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world."

Jesus has promised that one day all hurts will be healed, and all tears will be wiped away. But, until that day comes, as an act of faith, we devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion.

We have no illusions. There are too many people stranded on the shore for us to save.

But, that's not our job. Our job is to care for that little corner of the world in which we have been placed. And even a cup of cold water can make a huge and unexpected difference to those to whom we give it.

## HOSPITALITY AND A CHANGED LIFE

And according to Jesus such acts change us as well. The reward we receive from such acts is a life that is changed forever. Christ is in us.

When we humbly serve each other, grace becomes a lived reality. And that's why I think the spiritual gift of hospitality might be the most important gift of all.

Jesus told his disciples, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." This is a shocking statement. When the world welcomes a disciple, it is equivalent to welcoming Jesus. It is equivalent to welcoming God.

Those first disciples often fell woefully short of what Jesus called them to do and be. And, come to think of it, so do we. We sing, "Let others see Jesus in you." But, given our actions, sometimes that sounds like nothing but a pipe dream.

I have great love for the church, but I also know that we have glaring weaknesses. We fall woefully short of what Jesus calls us to do and be.

But, in this passage we learn that perfection is not required. Just do some small act of kindness in the name of Jesus and God will multiply the miracle.

## HOSPITALITY AND REWARD

Just do some small act of kindness in the name of Jesus and God will reward you.

That's a big part of this passage, the idea of reward. When I think of reward I think of gold stars on school papers as a child or praise from parents and teachers. As we get older reward comes in the form of more money and promotions. Perhaps we are rewarded by public recognition and a well deserved round of applause for our work.

But, the reward Jesus is talking about in our lesson for today is not like those kinds of rewards. Jesus said, "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..."

What is the reward of the prophet or the reward of the righteous? It seems to me that the reward is the opportunity to participate in the kingdom of God. God has a plan for our world, and we get to help.

This reward is not extrinsic like gold stars or money or a round of applause. The reward that Jesus is talking about is intrinsic. These acts change us on the inside.

There are many who have recognized this fact. For example, John Dryden, a poet who lived in the 1600s wrote, "Love is love's reward."

The British philanthropist, John Ruskin who lived in the 1800s wrote, "The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it."

And William Bennett, the former secretary of education said in our time, "A kind and compassionate act is often its own reward."

Jesus said, "...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25) Maybe this is another way of talking about the reward of the righteous. We find our life as we give it away. We find love and joy as we live in a loving and joyful way.

## HOSPITALITY AND THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Anna Carter Florence, a professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary told of a student who asked, "Does it matter how that cup of cold water is offered?" He went on to describe a number of feeding programs in the Atlanta area that he had participated in.

These programs are sorely needed, but they tend to be a bit impersonal. A buffet counter divides the giver and the receiver. Those who serve stand on one side of the barrier with aprons and spoons, dishing out portions of food. Those who come to eat stand on the other side of the barrier with plates, moving slowly down the line. The only encounter between the parties is the moment when the server's spoon touches the diner's plate.

But, this student also served at another feeding program that was quite different in its approach. Dr. Florence described the program called the Open Door this way:

“At The Open Door ... breakfast looks different. There are one hundred and twenty tickets available each morning, and guests receive their tickets as they arrive. At 6:00 a.m., the door opens, and the person standing at the door begins shouting out numbers.

As your number is called, you enter the dining room and sit family style, in tables of six. Servers bring platters of eggs and grits, coffee and oranges, and then they bring refills, as many as you like.

No one tells you to get up from the table before you're ready. No one asks you to move along. The assumption is you are here for the meal, and you are welcome.

Servers and guests have space and time for conversation, and because the same faces tend to show up day after day, week after week, friendships form...these kinds of relationships are possible because the *space* is created for them.

The Open Door is committed to offering the cup of cold water, yes—but it has also thought long and hard about *how* to offer it. It has decided that offering a smaller number of cups around a table is preferable to offering a thousand cups in a line.”

## HOSPITALITY IN OUR CHURCH

I've been thinking this past week about how hospitality plays such a big role in this church.

Every month some of you serve a meal to those who are hungry.  
Every week some of you bring groceries for those who don't have enough to make ends meet.

Every week some of you take time to really listen to someone who is hurting.  
Every week someone sends a card expressing joy or concern.  
Every week we send gather things for a soldier who feels alone and vulnerable.

Hospitality truly plays a big role in this church and for that I give thanks.

Our actions won't end world hunger or cure hearts that are broken or bring about world peace. But, our actions make a difference to those who receive our gifts. Our actions make a difference to God.

And, perhaps most importantly, those actions change us on the inside. What we do and how we do it are vitally important.

Remember. Hospitality is just another word for grace.

Don't underestimate its power.

Amen.