

Healing and Hospitality

Deuteronomy 10: 17-19; Hebrews 13: 1-3; Romans 15: 5-7

Hospitality is a healing thing. It can even save someone's life.

In the ancient near east in biblical times, hospitality could be a life and death matter. So there was a sacred code that if a stranger came to your home you would welcome them and offer food and shelter.

So also with the ancient Celtic tradition in Ireland and Scotland. There was a Celtic rune or song of hospitality that went:

We saw a stranger yesterday

We put food in the eating place

Drink in the drinking place

Music in the listening place....

The early church also observed this sacred obligation and took it a step further by creating *hospices* around the empire, safe places for travelers and strangers.

We need such places of welcome and hospitality today in order to survive, not just in a physical sense but also in a spiritual, emotional and psychological sense. People can die from a lack of welcome and hospitality, of loneliness and despair.

Henri Nouwen has defined hospitality as the offering of a *safe space where a person can enter without fear and be who they are*. You can be such a place, your heart can be such a place for others. A church can be such a place. The sign by our front door which we helped placed around the community says in effect: *We are a place of hospitality:*

We Believe

Black Lives Matter

Love is Love

Feminism is for Everybody

No Human Being is Illegal

Science is Real

Be Kind to All

Last week at the Iredell Statesville School Board meeting our own Steve Coarsey spoke on behalf of PFLAG—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—about the revelation of outrageous secret racist and anti-LGBTQ emails that were

passed between board members. Our friend Todd Scott spoke on behalf of the local NAACP.

So, gospel hospitality is not the same as *Southern Hospitality*. And you don't need a subscription to *Better Housekeeping* to practice it! It's not the same as social entertaining. There are those who do use their homes as places of gospel hospitality, but hospitality has many other dimensions.

I've known people whose very being was a place of hospitality. I was leaving a restaurant one day. The man behind me had a terribly disfigured face. I had turned my face from him. We do that, don't we? Then I saw a physician I knew coming in the door. Her face lit up, not with the sight of me, but as she welcomed with her eyes the man with the disfigured face behind me. Hospitality. Another word for compassion.

II

Jesus was the epitome of hospitality. He welcomed every one with the glad welcome of God. Though he was the "Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head", he became a host of hospitality to all. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners. And he didn't require prior proof of repentance before the meal. He *enjoyed* them, for goodness sake, yes, for goodness sake. And it

became a scandal for the respectable of his day. “Has this man no scruples?”!
“Has God no scruples?”

My mentor George Buttrick described Jesus with these words: he was
“surprise of Mercy, outgoing Gladness, Rescue, Healing and Life.” I cannot think
of a better description of the hospitality of Jesus.

There are those around us every day who think their lives are of little worth,
who bear the mockery and derision of others, who wonder how long they can bear
it. Hospitality, yours, mine, the church’s can save their lives.

Loneliness is epidemic in our nation, and people are dying what some call
“deaths of despair.” “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying”, the old hymn goes,
“Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.” That’s our mission too.

III

There was a problem in the church of Rome. They didn’t like each other
very much. Some bragged about being the “strong in faith”, while others called
themselves with false humility the “weak in faith.” It was all about whether you
needed all the laws and rules of the tradition to be a good Christian and person,
or whether you could live by the spirit of the law, which was the law of love. You
might call them the liberals and conservatives in the church. If I were preaching

in a black church some in the congregation might yell out at this point: “Be careful now!” or “Go on!”

So there was disagreement and discord. Yes, even in the early church! So Paul in the latter part of his letter to the Romans set out to give helpful instructions about how to live together in their disagreements. He said, in effect, your liberal brother or sister doesn’t have to become conservative and your conservative brother or sister doesn’t have to become liberal!

Then he closed with this flourish of words: “*Welcome one another, therefore as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*” Welcome one another in the *church* too!

We follow one who welcomed sinners and outcasts and who crossed lines of race, gender, nation and religion to bring the love of God to all. Gospel hospitality.

When Jesus met the woman of Samaria by the well and she, startled, said, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” Then Jesus offered her a drink of living water. Hospitality.

IV

The book of Hebrews has these memorable words:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in so doing some have entertained angels unawares.

Has that ever happened to you, you meet a stranger at the door, or at the checkout line, or in a crowd, and they turn out to be an angel in disguise?

This passage echoes the wonderful story from Genesis about Abraham and Sarah. They were having trouble conceiving a child. God had promised them that their descendants would number as the stars in the sky, the grains of sand in the sea, but no luck, and they were past the child bearing age. As Sarah put it, “I am worn and he is old.” Menopause had begun years ago for Sarah, and Abraham, the Scriptures say, was “as good as dead”, biologically speaking, with no Viagra in sight.

But one day Abraham saw three men outside in the yard. He offered them a place to eat and rest. Tradition says Abrahams’s tent was open on all four sides so that people could come in.

As the three talked with Abraham, they asked, “Where is Sarah?” “There in the tent”, Abraham replied. Then they said, “We will come back in due season and Sarah will have a son.”

Eavesdropping behind the flaps of the tent, Sarah began laughing, laughing at the crazy incredulity of it all, that she at her age could bear a child.

But guess what happened? Sarah laughed all the way from the retirement home to the maternity ward. She laughed through morning sickness and swollen feet. And when the boy was born, and they placed him at her breast, she said, “I will name him Isaac”, which means “Laughter.”

The three men turned out to be angels in disguise, or “messengers of God” which is what the word “angel” means.

You never know who’s going to show up at your door or in your lives. They are strangers now, but they might turn into messengers of God. Angels unawares.

V

Hospitality can save lives. That’s true for nations too. One of the core values of ancient Israel, and core commandments, was to care for strangers, or immigrants. So in Deuteronomy we read:

For the Lord your God is God supreme...who shows no favor and takes no bribes, but upholds the cause of the orphan and widow and befriends the strangers.

And why? “For you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” Such commandments, the text says, were given for our “wellbeing.”

We all need to think like immigrants. A hatred and fear of immigrants has been growing in our nation the last decade, and by the polling of Robert P. Jones, white evangelical churches have been foremost in being anti-immigrant.

George W. Bush while President called for a comprehensive immigration reform bill. It hasn't happened yet. One sticking point has been giving undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. Refugees fleeing danger are being held at the border, or turned away.

What would Jesus think, he who as a child was himself a refugee in Egypt as Mary and Joseph fled the sword of King Herod.

Is the immigration issue religious or political? The answer is "Yes!"

VI

People use the word "other" today as a verb. We "other" people when we make those who are different our enemy, when we turn difference into despising. "Othering" is the opposite of Hospitality.

When Marian Anderson the great black soprano was invited to sing at Princeton University decades ago, the Nassau Inn the prestigious hotel on campus which normally hosted all guest of the University, refused to let her stay there because she was black. Albert Einstein, who was then a Princeton faculty member, took her in at their home. He became a champion of integration and

civil rights. He knew what it was like to be treated as an “other” and he and his wife became exemplars of hospitality.

You know, I’ve known you, Grace Baptist, for seven years now. I’m beginning to think your middle name is “Hospitality.”