

Hospitality

by

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Readings: Jeremiah 28:5-9
Matthew 10:40-42

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Matthew 10:40-42

“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.”

When I was in my last year at Princeton Seminary my roommate was a friend named Blair Moffett. Blair was from a long line of missionaries to Korea. His grandfather, Samuel Moffett, had been the first Presbyterian missionary to visit the interior of Korea and to establish churches there. Later there would be schools and hospitals and

small as well as large congregations in the areas surrounding Soul and Taegu. Blair's father was born there as were three other children. They came back here for college and beyond, becoming doctors or professors of theology or just ministers. Two of them went back to Korea to serve in seminaries or hospitals there.

During that senior year at Princeton my friend Blair invited me home to Oyster Bay, New York for Thanksgiving with his family. It was a welcome break and opportunity to meet his parents and brother and sister. His father was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Oyster Bay, not far from Teddy Roosevelt's old home, Sagamore Hill, out on the north shore of Long Island. We must have arrived on Wednesday evening. I remember that it was before dinner time but already dark.

Directly there came a knock on the door. Two men in dark suits were escorted into the manse which was next door to the church. Blair's father introduced the two as friends from Korea who had come from New York City where they had finished meetings at 475 Riverside Drive, the headquarters of our denomination and many other Protestant Churches and the World Council of Churches. They excused themselves with Mr. Moffett, retiring into his study. After about an hour they emerged from the study and we all sat down to dinner.

Lively conversation followed, centering on the church in Korea and some support or counsel that Mr. Moffett and other American Christians had offered to provide. For a young seminarian it was all a heady time and exciting to think that such visitors were a regular part of the comings and goings in Blair's family household. They, however, thought little of it and soon turned the conversation to their small church's new tracker organ and the dedicatory recital that was to be

presented later that evening. After dinner we adjourned to the church, the guests from Korea and I followed along and, later, following a reception at the church we headed for bed. It had been a delightful evening unlike any I had experienced before in my own home back in Missouri. It seemed to me that no one, other than my grandmother, ever just dropped in before dinner at my parent's home. If they had my mother would have been fit to be tied, convinced that the house was not in order.

What struck me that Thanksgiving, I believe, was the ease with which the entire Moffett family received these visitors and included them in the regular Wednesday evening plans. I'm not sure anyone knew the Koreans were coming out to Oyster Bay but there they were and there they found a welcome as though the visit had been anticipated for months. I gathered that this kind of dropping by from the international community, as well as others with business in New York City was a regular thing. It was just one evening but I knew my horizons were being expanded through this vision of Christian hospitality, substantive conversation before and during dinner followed by an organ recital like none I'd heard before. I thought to myself, "Yes, this is why I came east to school. Yes, this is why Blair is like a brother to me. I am learning from this friend who grew up in America but has, literally, traveled around the world, speaks other languages, and knows not a stranger."

On the Friday after Thanksgiving we drove over to Sagamore Hill to see Teddy Roosevelt's home. The great timbered room he added onto the back of this old Shingle Style house was to my eye the model of an early 20th- century welcoming space. I think I knew then that I was experiencing a home that, in its day, had been a politician and international statesman's hospitable equivalent for his time to the minister/missionary's home down the road. I left determined to practice

a similar hospitality in my own experience in the churches I would serve and in the home I hoped someday to establish with my own family. For the most part that is the way it has worked out, to the joy of us all. At BMPC this year we have emphasized a hospitality theme from our Mission Statement as we continue a long tradition of welcoming the visitor. Many of you follow similar practice in your gracious welcome to your homes.

Our text implies that as we welcome the stranger/prophet/international traveler/neighbor... we welcome the one who sent him or her. Since the words are spoken by Jesus there is more than a suggestion that to welcome the stranger is to welcome him and if that doesn't get your attention I don't know what will. The image is one of discovery and exciting conversation and new dimensions of self-awareness. The awesome notion here—that to welcome the visitor is to welcome someone who reveals God—is enough to make your heart skip a beat or two. Yet that is what is being said, here and elsewhere in the New Testament as the opportunity inherent in our welcoming the stranger is emphasized. We dare not forget the words at the close of Matthew's Gospel, also known as the last judgment.

Then the king will say to those on his right hand, "Come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in." ~ Matthew 25:34-35

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I expect, knowing you as I do, that you may find this mildly interesting but not really surprising. You know, from your own experience, what memorable hospitality looks like. You have experienced your share of it. You have expressed your own hospitality toward others and found it rewarding. Still, some of you may be asking, as I have, what is the darker side of hospitality and why do we not make more effort to offer it?

One factor is *time*. Does Jesus have any idea how much time we could consume following the not-so-subtle encouragement to be gracious and welcoming of others. It takes time and energy to do this whether it is in our home or in our church or in our work-related encounters with others.

Another factor which discourages our acting hospitably as often as we could is *fear*—fear of the stranger; fear of what will be required of us; fear of the unknown development. In earlier cultures, such as those of Jesus’ day, this was a major factor to be overcome if one was to welcome the stranger without fear of being overpowered by the stranger. Ana Maria Pineda writes in an essay about our topic: “...human beings try to keep strangers at a distance (more often than not); we avoid risky encounters or we try to neutralize the stranger’s power in order to protect our own. Some societies try to appease strangers with gifts; others exclude or even destroy them.”¹

¹ Ana Maria Pineda, *Hospitality*, in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, 1997) p. 31

I know this sounds a long distance from our earlier image of gracious hospitality in the Moffett's Oyster Bay dining room. But if you add in the way we feel when discovering a true stranger at the door—to our house, to our church or at our place of work—then we begin to comprehend the nature of our fear that the stranger may have his own wounds from the past left by encounters in which he/she was ignored by others or, worse, excluded by others.

We may wonder, what is to keep such people from seeking some retribution or harm toward the segment of society that has treated them badly? Isn't our lack of understanding coupled with the stranger's not really knowing us the cause of our suspicion or fear of each other? Just to counter that misunderstanding is reason enough to encourage each of us to travel as widely as possible, meeting with and talking with the person in the foreign land. What better way to overcome our xenophobic assumptions.

Our fear of the stranger is enough to keep some of from exercising hospitality toward anyone we don't already know. The stranger "represents the unknown, a challenge to the familiar constructs of our personal world".² Because of the challenge that the stranger represents, early homes in this country that might be visited by a traveler unknown to the family would be locked away from the rest of the family for the night. Eighteenth century homes, especially those in rural settings, might have an upstairs attic room above the living quarters that could be locked from below by the owner to keep the stranger at bay for the night. The fear was that he might rob them or otherwise overpower them if he

² Ibid.

was left free to come downstairs during the night. So they locked him in with a chamber pot until morning.

Obviously we have come a long way since those days. Still, the caution toward the stranger is ever-present. Thus the innocent-sounding interrogation we give to the new-comer in our midst: *Where are you from? What did your family do there? How long have you been in this area? What is your work?* Sometimes it is only friendly interest that drives our interview. But other times it reveals a suspicion toward the one who is unknown to us and whose background may be alien to our own. Such thinking is operative in our xenophobic moments of state and national efforts to slow down the flow of immigrants to this country. (Generally speaking, unless our relatives were American Indians, we all come from immigrants. They just happened to get here first and were called settlers.)

Our Christian tradition is grounded in hospitality, especially that hospitality shown to Joseph and Mary outside Bethlehem on that night of nights we know as our incarnation as a new people with a new identity. That is what reenactments of that evening when Jesus was born are about. In the Latino tradition the remembrance and celebration in late December is called *Posada*, meaning shelter. Ana Maria Pineda tells about the tradition as practiced in the Mission District of San Francisco. There, for nine evenings before Christmas, the children proceed down 24th street, some carrying candles and statues of Mary and Joseph. They assume the role of the weary couple, going from one home to another as though they were inns. The request for lodging is made, (*“In the name of God, we ask those who dwell here, give to some travelers lodging this evening”*) and the answer is always the same: (*“This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel.”*)

“For eight days,” writes Sister Ana Maria Pineda, “the scene is reenacted. Finally on the ninth day, the eve of Christmas, Joseph’s request moves the heart of an innkeeper, who offers the young couple all that he has left—a stable. Yet the stable is enhanced by the love with which the innkeeper offers it, and this humble place becomes the birthplace of Jesus. In an outpouring of joy and festivity, those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph in song and dance, food and drink. Candy and treats from the piñata shower the children, and the community recalls anew how the stranger at one’s door can be God in disguise.”³

Thanks be to God.

³ Ibid.