

June 19, 2016

Dent Davis
Tryon Presbyterian Church

The Grace of Hospitality

Genesis 18:1-15

Hebrews 13:2

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Today's worship theme is about hospitality. Hospitality is a cornerstone of the Christian faith. And hospitality is one of the greatest needs in our world today. It's also a key element in our upcoming building renovation project.

Hospitality takes many forms. Last Thursday our church hosted a rest stop for a group of twenty bicyclists who were participating in a 150-mile charity bike ride from Gastonia to Lake Junaluska in Haywood County. Lake Junaluska is a national conference center for the United Methodist Church like Montreat is for Presbyterians. The ride was sponsored by a group raising money to support United Methodist campus ministries in colleges in Western North Carolina.

For several hours cyclists stopped at our church to rest, get a drink of water, various snacks, and use the bathroom. I asked several why they were participating in this ride. "It's great exercise," one responded. "And fun. It raises money for a good cause, and you meet some great people." I asked them how they would describe the ride. "Hot," one woman responded. She was a Methodist minister from the Charlotte area. A recently retired man added, "Two words: 'Serious up.'" He was referring to the elevation climb from Gastonia to Lake Junaluska in Haywood County. Believe it or not, several participants expressed exceptional gratitude for our restrooms. Since our bathrooms have been identified as being in particular need of improvement by many of our members, I guess that just goes to show how the same thing can look quite different depending on one's perspective and situation. Hospitality matters.

According to the dictionary, hospitality is the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, strangers, or ideas. Hospitality is something that most of us do all the time. We invite people to dinner, put family and friends up in the guest room, greet newcomers to our community, and maybe even invite them to church.

Sometimes though hospitality is more difficult. If a stranger knocks on the door, I am going to look carefully out the window before opening the door. And if it's two young men with short hair, dressed in dark suits carrying Bibles, I have to confess that I have on more than one occasion run and hid in the laundry room. And if I don't recognize the caller on the telephone, sometimes I will just let it ring. Most of us have made the mistake of answering a telephone call, and having to endure a long conversation with some insurance provider who wants to be our new best friend and look after our financial needs.

In today's world it is especially hard to be hospitable to people who are very different, or who don't speak our language, or whose customs are different from ours. And there are security issues to consider, and economic issues, and even scheduling issues. Most reasonable people would say that there are some obvious limits to hospitality.

Except evidently in the Bible. One of the amazing messages of the Bible, Old Testament and New, is the emphasis on hospitality. Jesus went to a wedding feast at Cana in Galilee. The whole town was there celebrating. The hosts ran out of wine. So Jesus made 180 gallons more of really good wine out of some water sitting in big stone jars over in the corner – and he did it so that the family could be hospitable.

Later Jesus was teaching a crowd on a hillside. And evidently the sermon went on a little too long and the people got hungry. So Jesus took five loaves and fishes and fed them all, Republicans and Democrats, Baptists and Presbyterians, young and old, all 5000 of them, and fed them all they could eat, with a truck load of leftovers for Thermal Belt Outreach Ministries. Now that's hospitality.

Then there's the Parable of the Good Samaritan where an unnamed Samaritan helps a Jew who has been robbed and badly injured. Samaritans and Jews were mortal enemies in the culture they lived in, yet the hated Samaritan made the effort to be hospitable to the Jew his people despised. And then of course there is Jesus' Great Commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" in Mark 12, where Jesus provides no qualifiers as to who the neighbor should be. Hospitality has been a strong and consistent theme in the Bible, even if it often involves sacrifice and risk.

Our lesson from Genesis this morning is one of the most famous Old Testament stories of hospitality: the story told in Genesis 18 of three strangers who happen upon Abraham's camp by the Oaks of Mamre. These are strangers – think about that a minute – strangers – and three of them, who just arrive, uninvited and unexpected. Just as unbidden and unexpected as the two young men I mentioned in their dark suits carrying Bibles, or the lady trying to sell me insurance on the phone. Yet Abraham invites them in, and he and Sarah offer them a feast, and afterward they suggest that Abraham and Sarah would have a child. Sarah laughed. But nine months later Isaac came along. So, go figure. Evidently hospitality makes a difference.

Maybe that's why the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews can write in our text for this morning: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). You never know who you might be entertaining, maybe even an angel who doesn't look like an angel. There's a message here, and a message that's especially important in today's world.

Hospitality is one reason why we are undertaking the building renovation project that you have been hearing about the last few weeks. We want to be able to welcome people – members, friends, and even strangers who come to our church to worship, or to pray, or to a community program, or maybe just because they are curious. But in order for us to even have a chance to be hospitable in our relationships, we need a building that is accessible.

Think about it. It makes sense that we have a space where we can greet each other, meet newcomers, and engage in unhurried conversations before and after worship – no matter what the weather. And it makes sense that our sanctuary might have the flexibility to accommodate different kinds of programs, different size choirs and musical groups, and that people can easily get into and out of the pews.

It makes sense for people to be able to get into and out of the building easily, and safely, for people to be able to see and hear when they are in our building. It makes sense that everyone from the tiniest toddler to our oldest member would be able to easily traverse this building without a bunch of steps. It makes sense for our building be accessible to those who are in wheelchairs or using walkers. It makes sense that we have bathrooms that are accessible. All these things and others are aspects of hospitability, and hospitality is something the Bible clearly teaches us to learn and to do.

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a visitor to a new church? Mary and I have had that experience numerous times when we have been on vacations. I don't know about you, but for me it is often awkward. If you're a visitor like we were in Sarasota last summer, you don't know anyone. You don't know the building. You don't know where the restrooms are. You don't know when you're supposed to stand and sit, or who usually sits where. I'll never forget the time we accidentally sat in the seat of an older member at First Presbyterian Church in Sarasota. We arrived just before the service started and we were sitting there at the end of one of the pews in the back trying to figure out the service. The bulletin was different than what we were used to. All of a sudden we looked up and there was an elderly woman holding on to a walker. She asked us if we would mind moving. It was awkward. The service was just about ready to start.

Later we had a chance to talk with her, and we found out that she needed to sit on the end because she couldn't manage the acrobatics required to climb over people and move in toward the center of the pew. Their pews are almost as difficult as ours to navigate. So we moved and were glad to do so, but we felt

bad because we didn't know. When you are a visitor there are a lot of things you don't know. It's uncomfortable. Hospitality involves all the different ways that you and I help people who visit our church feel comfortable, so their experience is not awkward, and they can easily worship and find the strength that they need for living.

Hospitality involves our attitudes toward other people, especially people who are like strangers to us. It involves how we construct the physical spaces in our church. It involves how we choose to interact with other people, especially those different from ourselves. We need to eliminate as many challenges as possible in our worship so everyone who comes through these doors can receive the spiritual strength they are seeking. There are enough challenges in life. We need to help people meet those challenges by being hospitable.

Most of us can understand hospitality as making guests feel welcome, but there's also a deeper spiritual aspect to hospitality that is actually the real basis of all the other hospitable things we do and say. The heart of the spiritual life involves the process of opening our hearts and minds to the guidance and the work of God's Holy Spirit. The process of doing that is an act of hospitality. When we pray, for example, we are asking God to come into our lives and help us, and that is an act of hospitality. The act of faith is the process of making my decisions, my attitudes, my hopes, my dreams, and myself available to God. Faith is literally letting God into my life. There are many ways to let God into our lives: prayer, meditation, study, service, generosity, sharing.

Hospitality in whatever form it takes is not always an easy thing for many of us. We are creatures of habit and often can't help thinking of ourselves first: our efforts, our ideas, our solutions, our thinking, and our arguments. Sometimes it is hard to even to consider another approach or idea, from anyone, let alone a stranger, or even the Spirit of God who sometimes according to our lesson from Genesis shows up disguised as a stranger, and who often seems to speak in a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12 KJV).

Hospitality is at the heart of our building project. It is also at the heart of the Christian life. The very act of hospitality is also often an opportunity for incredible growth and life. Hospitality is not easy. Often it involves both risk and sacrifice. But the rewards are also great. Remember the words of our text this morning from Hebrews: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). Somehow God is often present in our acts of hospitality. Remember too the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 where Jesus promises that even as we receive a stranger with hospitality, we receive Jesus himself. It's a promise. Hospitality matters.