

Sermon 5 Pentecost Year A (Proper 6)
June 15, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

What Kind of Guest Are You?

Then Jesus went all about the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, for they were harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send our laborers into his harvest." Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to cure every disease and every sickness... These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment."

When Jesus sent the disciples out to the cities and villages of Galilee, his instructions were daunting. They were to follow in his footsteps, bringing good news and healing people in the name of God. They were to give freely of what they themselves had been given. And they were to travel light. In the verses that follow today's text, he tells them to take no money, no bag, not even an exchange of clothes, but instead to rely completely on the hospitality of others. They were to go into the world, in other words, with undefended hearts, as guests in search of welcome, and to do for others what Jesus had done for them.

I'd like to speak this morning about what it's like to go out into the world as a guest, with an undefended heart—a heart strong enough to be vulnerable, with firm enough boundaries to be open, compassionate in response to the world's pain, yet not undone by the strong emotions that pain can evoke. The only way I can describe what it feels like is to liken it to surrender. "It's about giving up," writes the author Sara Miles. "You get to the point where you just have to give up. And then it's about being honest."¹

I heard the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori preach on this very topic last month and much of what I say today I owe to her. In particular, she said something that has reframed for me the meaning of hospitality: "Our most fundamental act of peace-making on this planet," she said, "indeed, the greatest impact we will have anywhere, is in our role as the guest." Then she asked a question that I have since pondered in my heart daily: "What kind of guest are you?"

We typically speak of hospitality from the perspective of the host—what it means to be welcome others, to share what we have, to create spaces of welcome for others. But what does it look like to be a good guest? There's an equal, if not greater responsibility of hospitality when we are guests, for as guests, we enter hearts and homes that do not belong to us. As guests, we stand in and walk through someone else's sacred space. We ask them to make room for us, accommodate us, and receive what we have to give. Taking seriously our place as guests in the world has implications for every arena of life, from casual conversation to our nation's foreign policy.

¹ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 62.

A few months ago, Paul and I were traveling and we stayed for a few days at a bed-and-breakfast, which, as you know, is a place of lodging that is also someone's home. Almost immediately, I felt uncomfortable in the presence of the woman who was our host. Everything about us seemed to annoy or inconvenience her. She was tense, irritable, and picky. "Lady," I thought to myself, uncharitably, "you are in the wrong line of work." Even serving breakfast—which, as the name implies, is what bed-and-breakfasts are for—put her out in ways that made me want to leave for the nearest hotel, where I would be assured a higher level of professional hospitality. But then it dawned on me that I wasn't being a particularly gracious guest. We weren't staying in a hotel, after all. We were staying in her *home*. It was clear that she had converted her home into a bed-and-breakfast not because she wanted to, but because she had to. So I worked on changing my attitude—which took more effort than I'm proud to admit—and I approached her with greater humility. I walked through the hallways quietly, greeted her warmly, complimented her on beautiful home, asked conversational questions, and offered to bring dishes into the kitchen after breakfast. Her demeanor softened considerably. More important, my guarded, easily-offended heart softened when I saw her through the eyes of a guest.

The Presiding Bishop's context for her reflection on living as a guest with an undefended heart was a trip that she had recently taken to the Holy Land—the setting for all the stories we read in Scripture, and now a place of tremendous anxiety and violence. She spoke with people who occupied every place on the highly-charged, polarized spectrum between Israelis and Palestinians. She offered her support to fledgling efforts to promote peace and understanding among historic enemies. "When Jesus tells us to love our enemies," she said, "it's not an abstract, from-a-distance kind of love that he's talking about. He means for us *to go into* those relationships with an undefended heart." I thought to myself, "Here's a woman who knows what she's talking about." The Presiding Bishop travels around the world and bears the full weight of the Anglican Communion's anger at the American Church. In this country, she travels to dioceses that have voted to break away from the authority she represents. A big part of the Presiding Bishop's job is to go to places where people are mad at her, listen, and not react in kind.

It is no small task to go out into the world as a guest with an undefended heart. For our instincts, understandably, are of self-protection, and our initial concerns are self-directed: What do I feel? What do I need? What can you do for me? An undefended heart is practiced in laying down those self-focused instincts and needs in order to receive from another. Is the person standing before you angry? Then receive the anger. Is the person before you grieving? Then receive the grief. Is the person before you anxious and guarded or self-centered and mean? Then receive it all. You don't need to do anything with what the other directs toward you, and it probably doesn't all belong to you, but with an undefended heart you are able to receive it and give it a place to be. And that, as the Presiding Bishop said, can be our most important contribution to the cause of peace.

Cultivating an undefended heart is the quintessential act of non-violence. Martin Luther King spoke of this same reality in the language of redemptive suffering, a hallmark of African American Christianity. In speaking out against the injustice, members of the Civil Rights movement were subjected to all manner of violence. Their task, King told them, was to absorb it and not retaliate. "Don't allow anybody to pull you so low as to make you hate them," he said. "Don't allow anybody to cause you to lose

your self-respect.” Suffering becomes redemptive—it leads to a greater good—when an individual or group is willing to accept suffering without seeking revenge. If we refuse to treat others as we ourselves are treated, a little bit of the world’s anger is taken out of circulation, and a little bit of the world’s pain is healed.

But lest we imagine that being the guest always involves suffering, let me remind us of the gifts we receive as guests in the world, and of the unique gifts we are in a position, as guests, to give. The Presiding Bishop spoke of the radical hospitality that is the hallmark of the Middle East. Indeed, hospitality is a religious mandate in any part of the world where human survival can depend upon the kindness of strangers. If you’ve ever traveled or lived among impoverished people, then you’ve probably experienced something of that kind of hospitality—people with so little giving you the best food they can prepare, food that they can ill-afford for themselves. There is such grace in receiving the best another has to give. It takes your breath away, and puts all pettiness and anxiety about having enough or receiving your due in its place. It creates in you the desire to do the same someday—to give the very best you have, no matter the cost, for you received without payment and as a result you want to give others the same free gift.

Today we heard the story of Abraham and Sara receiving “the Lord” in the form of three strangers. Abraham is often held up to us as an example of one who offered lavish hospitality and in so doing, entertained angels unaware. But what if we turn the story around and consider the three men? They were the guests, whom the story refers to, collectively, as “the Lord.” They came in need of shelter and received it at Abraham and Sarah’s hand. Through them, God chose to speak words of promise, so that by the time the story was written down, it’s no longer clear if they were three men or if they were God. It’s something to remember the next time you’re receiving hospitality at the hand of another—that through your words, God may speak to the one who is your host. Through you, the guest, another may be blessed, so much so that later on, they won’t be able to distinguish your words from the word God spoke to them through you. You may be the angel, coming in the role of a guest, with gifts that God will give through you.

Let me close with a story I read on the internet this week, about being gracious guests, on Father’s Day, no less. Today, on Father’s Day, a group of gay and lesbian parents and their children are the guests of Saddleback Church in California, a mega-church led by Pastor Rick Warren, author of the *Purpose-Driven Life*. Saddleback Church’s position on homosexuality and LGBT families is anything but hospitable. But this group of families is worshipping there today, and then will meet the leaders of Saddleback for a private meal and conversation.

Today marks the end of a six-week gay-family friendly road trip. The goal was to initiate dialogue with mega-church congregations (known for being not-so-friendly to gay families) and promote greater understanding. The leaders of this initiative *asked* the leaders of six mega-churches around the country if they could join their congregations in worship and then share a meal together. Every one of the high-profile mega-churches pastors said yes. “These meetings have been an occasion to clear up misperceptions on both sides and to begin to focus on what we have in common,” says one of the organizers of the road trip, who is traveling with his partner and their three children. “It’s not your average summer vacation, but it’s been an amazing experience. In the end, we’re doing it to make a safer world for our kids.” Imagine what it took for the organizers of this

initiative to make the initial phone calls, to ask to be the guests of those who have spoken out so publicly against them, and the potential for good born of such courage.

Go out into the world, as guests in my name, Jesus said. Go out with an undefended heart. What kind of guests are we? And what gifts do we have to offer those who receive us?