

“HOSPITALITY IN A HUNGRY AND HOSTILE WORLD”

Rev. Dr. Floyd W. Churn

July 4, 2010

Scriptures: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Jesus sends 70 of his disciples out to all the surrounding towns and villages, to prepare the people for a later visit by Jesus himself, who would come preaching the kingdom of God with urgency. These lead teams of disciples were not to press the message home like an impassioned evangelist using oratory skills and emotional, manipulative pleas and veiled threats to get the people to come to Jesus. Jesus would be coming to them; their mission was to prepare the way in a spirit of grace and hospitality. Maybe that's all we can ever do or should try to do in our evangelism: practice and seek to prompt hospitality so that when Jesus comes to people today in the work of the Holy Spirit, hearts will be tuned to grace and open to letting Christ come in. We lay the groundwork – finally, Christ must arrive.

This is a sermon about hospitality above all – hospitality practiced as both active agents *and* as grateful receivers of hospitality. *Hospitality* is one of those wonderful words that never seems to lose its charm by overuse...like the word *grace*, which is spirit beneath hospitality. Hospitality may conjure up images of convivial dinner parties, mutual invitations into homes, gracious hosting and warmly shared conversation in a setting of comfort and ease, a bedroom lovingly prepared for the overnight guest, impromptu cocktails in a neighbor's back yard. And hospitality is all of that but much more than shared social graces. When viewed through the lens of God's injunction to his people, the ancient Hebrews, hospitality was not just a nice, neighborly gesture but a stringent requirement of faith. And not just for close friends, but especially for the stranger in the land. As God's law demanded: “For the Lord your God ... executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, [why?] for you were [once] strangers in the land of Egypt.¹ Remember?”

So Jesus prepares his low-key evangelism team of 70 (or 72 according to some ancient texts) to go out into the towns in a spirit that encourages, invites, and elicits hospitality. And when hospitality is extended, to be gracious enough to receive it from those they visit. That is sometimes the more difficult, for while it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive, it is also a blessing to be able to receive, to acknowledge that we need something someone else has to offer. Perhaps we feel it is weakness to be on the receiving end of things, that it diminishes our sense of worthiness, our self-sufficiency. Egos can get in the way of ministering by allowing others to minister to us. At the very least, if we *receive* hospitality we want to have the opportunity to show our good-heartedness by offering it in return at some time. But hospitality doesn't live by reciprocity – *quid pro quo* – but strictly by grace. We extend it or return it not out of obligation to repay a favor or to balance a social equation or to be thought of as magnanimous – but solely out of grace, or it is something less than hospitality.

Jesus sets the spirit for his disciples: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’” Don't go in arrogance, in a spirit of “Shape up!” or “Listen to us” or “We know what you need” – but “Peace to this house.” Come in a spirit more likely to engender hospitality, and then, if it is extended, minister to them by allowing them to practice hospitality to you. “Remain, eating and drinking what is set before you...bring a spirit of healing if there is infirmity, and the sermon you should preach is simply this: ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” – for where there is hospitality, the kingdom will find a home...it is very near.

Jesus knows that there is a deep hunger in the towns and villages of the world for that gentle spirit of welcome and invitation, grace and acceptance. That's really the core message of the gospel – “By grace, God has invited you into his home, his love” – and that's the starting point for evangelism. But what has Jesus commissioning and sending of disciples to do with us, in a far different society from the world of the ancient Near East. We latter-day disciples are called and commissioned by Jesus to relate to a world that hungers for true hospitality, for a spirit that, rather than judging, dividing, ranking or pigeon-holing people, invites people in, friend and stranger, and gives them space to be themselves. A “peace be with you” spirit that nourishes encouragement and friendship, rather than suspicious scrutiny, turns strangers into guests, and refuses to allow fear erect high walls of entry. There are many ways we can practice this spirit as Christ's community of disciples. I saw it enacted in uncommon measure the week of Christmas as so many of you –almost 300 – helped to welcome the homeless in Winter Relief and lived the gift of hospitality not just by the shelter and food you provided but in the way you engaged our guests as friends rather than objects of charity.

But while it is a hungry world, it is also a hostile world in many ways. It was back then and is today. Jesus told his disciples that despite their best, most gracious efforts, there would be times they were not welcomed, that their spirit of hospitality would be rejected, for there is and always has been much fear that can choke hospitality. Some towns will not receive you...some initiatives will fail because people will put up walls rather than open doors. Expect it and don't get paralyzed in a spirit of failure...don't carry it as a burden. What to do? Jesus says, “Well, just shake the dust off your feet and move on.” Someone has suggested that little gesture may have been intended by Jesus more as encouragement for rejected disciples than a rebuke of the town. John Oman calls it the “the sacrament of failure,” given by Jesus to his disciples to remind them that, in the familiar words, “You can't win 'em all,” “it's not all on your shoulders,” and “every skirmish isn't Armageddon,” the last great battle.ⁱⁱ Keep things in perspective, gather your backpack (we *are* called to travel lightly) and continue on – the loss is theirs, not yours. Another place may be more receptive.

We know that experience in our world today, for it is also a world that can be hostile to the gospel while, ironically, starving for the very nourishment the gospel has to offer. The problem is compounded by the fact that we think of ourselves as a religious land, but so many understand Christianity in such a shallow and culture-defined manner, a kind of civil religion, confusing it with the American way of life or the popular rendering of religion propagated by the media. As Jesus sent out disciples as missionaries in an alien land, make no mistake about it: ***we are in a missionary situation today***. Our society, our culture has such a domesticated understanding of what the Christian faith is really about, it's scandalous grace and its radical requirements. That's why the mission begins with grace...hospitality. We gently prepare the soil to get it ready for the seed that is the Lord's planting.

So important is hospitality that Jesus equates its victories with the defeat of Satan himself. When hospitality catches on, the devil is run out of that town or that place. And Jesus tells his disciples that despite those unwelcoming experiences from time to time, “You're really doing it, folks! I saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.” Great job – but in the last analysis, don't calculate your worth on your triumphs, your spiritual successes, your “jobs well done,” but that you are loved and embraced by God, your names written in his family register – the book of

heaven. That's what determines *our* worth as well: not the achievements accomplished or the good works we were able to pull off; but that God has declared us immeasurably valuable...his very children with our names written in that eternal book of unconditional love.

.....

We are gathered here today on a day of national importance, a day we citizens of whatever faith or no faith celebrate the birth of our nation – America the Beautiful. The 4th of July is a day to remember the daring vision and the bold courage and the perilous sacrifice that it took to launch this great experiment in democracy. It's a day to remember and cherish the principles that undergird our national life: freedom, liberty, and the affirmation that all persons are created equal with certain inalienable rights. I would also add that the 4th of July is very much about the theme of this sermon: hospitality. Who are we all, anyway, but those who have been welcomed from some other place, sometime in our family history, to be part of this country; we were all strangers in a strange land. Now sometimes there was hostility as another group of immigrants, different from us, arrived – but in the end, hospitality triumphed over hostility.

America is at its greatest when it practices generous hospitality in its national life and refuses to erect the walls of fear that divide and keep out. We are all immigrants. I had to chuckle recently when I was watching a movie on TV – and I wish I could remember the movie or the particulars of the scene – but the line I remember is one delivered by a pompous nativist who opined, oblivious to the irony and the ignorance he was spouting, “Things haven't been the same since those foreigners moved in.” Our nation was founded as a place that welcomed those escaping from places of oppression and exclusion, caught up in the familiar words at the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...send the homeless, tempest tossed to me...”

We haven't always lived out our foundational principles faithfully, including the spirit of generous hospitality. And so we need the kind of spirit that I believe is expressed in the hymn with which we'll close our service today – far from jingoism or nativism: God...shed your grace upon us...mend our every flaw...refine the gold ...crown all the good aspects with the spirit of brotherhood -- mutual respect and honor -- and let our cities be places of light, undimmed by human tears. We're failing some of these our high ideals in these days – but the story is not over, and people of faith can make a difference. One of those huge differences we can bring is the gift of hospitality overcoming fear, sprung from the generous heart that has known God's love, and through lives that have been commissioned by Jesus to come in peace and so prepare for the Lord himself to transform hostility and break down walls to let love in.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 10:17-19

ⁱⁱ As related in a sermon by Ernest Campbell, “Every Battle Isn't Armageddon,” in the book *To God Be the Glory: Sermons in Honor of George Arthur Buttrick*. Theodore A. Gill, Editor