

HOSPITALITY: A BIBLICAL REQUIREMENT

Genesis 18: 1–10

Luke 10: 38–42

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The theme for the day is hospitality, an essential ingredient for a kind and gentle society. Like charity, hospitality begins in the home. When we have house guests, we do our best to help them feel at ease, welcomed and appreciated. Best-selling books, Emily Post's classic works on etiquette in particular, helped several generations of Americans become gracious hosts and hostesses. Although she had a stringent list of do's and don'ts, when it came to entertaining guests, she believed it all boiled down to this: being a warm and generous presence to anyone who walks through your front door.

Two to four thousand years ago, in the Middle East especially, hospitality was the glue that held society together. It was engrained in their upbringing that even strangers should be received and welcomed as guests. Remember, there were no hotels or hostels back then. Travelers from distant places depended on the kindness of strangers, not only to feed them but to put them up for the night. The expectation was, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The family who took in a stranger might very well find themselves knocking on that same stranger's door when they were out traveling on the road. You can understand if these time-honored hospitality codes were violated, safe travels would've been virtually impossible.

Although hospitality was mandated, genuine hospitality meant not outwardly appearing put upon whenever a stranger darkened your door. Instead of throwing a few scraps of food at the stranger and inviting him or her to sleep with your livestock, people of goodwill welcomed strangers to share the evening meal with the family and provided the best accommodations possible.

We see this happening in the Genesis story. Abraham welcomed three strangers standing not very far from the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Displaying all the attributes of generous hospitality, he ran up to them before bowing down to the ground. Although there were three, Abraham addressed them as one, saying, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought... wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves and after that you may pass on- since you have come to your servant." (Genesis 18: 3-5)

You get the sense Abraham went all out welcoming these three when he instructed his wife Sarah to use the best flour to make three cakes. But the best was yet to come.

"He then ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and good and gave it to the servant who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf he prepared and set it before them and he stood by them under the tree while they ate." (Genesis 18:6-8)

At first, Abraham wasn't aware his guests were two angels and the Lord, posing as travelers. Perhaps Jesus had this story in mind when he taught, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you also do it to me." Later, the apostle Paul also encouraged hospitality when he wrote, "Always welcome the stranger for you may be entertaining angels unaware."

Today hotels and motels relieve us from the burden of hospitality in the way it was practiced in Bible times, yet the biblical expectation to be hospitable continues to remain in place. Even so, very few of us would ever feel comfortable welcoming strangers into our homes for security reasons. Who could blame you if you turned away total stranger from your front door on a dark and stormy night?

Some years ago, at eleven o'clock one night, someone was banging the manse front door. I opened the second floor bedroom window and called down. The man told me his car broke down and he needed money to get it fixed. I told him there was no place to get it fixed this late at night, so come back tomorrow morning. He got indignant. As he left, two other men stepped out from the shadows and followed him. My guilt for turning him away instantly dissipated. My wife and ten-year old daughter, not to mention myself, might have been victims of a home invasion. In this case, Jesus sage advice, "Be as wise as serpents but as gentle as doves," paid off.

Still, the practice of hospitality is an art form but when all is said and done, genuine hospitality comes from the heart. Usually we want to be gracious and generous hosts and hostesses because we have genuine affection for our guests. We want the house to be clean and comfortable and serve the best food and drink we can afford. Ideally, we go out of our way to make our guests feel like part of the family.

A case in point is found in the New Testament story of Mary and Martha welcoming Jesus into their home. Jesus arrived unannounced but was instantly welcomed like one of the family. Right away, Martha instinctively did what she did best. She stormed into the kitchen to prepare one of her famous meals. By nature, Martha was a work horse, with a "do it now" type of personality every family needs to keep things moving.

Mary, on the other hand, had a completely different disposition. Instead of going into the kitchen to help Martha, Mary went into the living room to keep Jesus company. By nature, Mary had a kind and gentle spirit, the type of personality every family needs to keep harmony. Please note: both personality types balance the other.

But something happened to upset that delicate balance. Martha, the human dynamo, got so busy, so frantic, so obsessed with preparing dinner she didn't appreciate Mary's role as a company keeper. "Master," she yelled from the kitchen, "tell that sister of mine to get in here and give me a hand!"

Listen to Gene Peterson's translation of Jesus' response to Martha: "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing too much and getting yourself all worked up over nothing. Only one thing is essential and Mary has chosen it. It's the main course and it won't be taken from her."

Martha was struggling to prepare a six course gourmet meal, while quiet, gentle Mary was doing quite well with her simple main course. She sat at Jesus feet, learning from him what it means to be truly human by simply being present to him and he with her.

Warning: don't let this story leave you with the mistaken impression Jesus put down hard work. The trains wouldn't run on time if the Martha's we know and love suddenly went on strike. Even so, this story teaches an important lesson. Our good works, even when done with the best of intentions, can be our undoing if we forget who we are doing it for. When that happens, our good works become an end in itself instead of the means to a greater end forming authentic, intimate relationships.

In the Old Testament we find the words, "When there is no vision, the people perish." Lose that vision, you lose your humanity. That's why Jesus said Mary had chosen the better way. By being present to Jesus, Mary gave herself to Jesus in a way Martha didn't. Mary's way gave Jesus permission to relax and feel welcomed and loved.

It's in our nature to get busy and stay busy. From an early age we've been taught our self-worth is based on what we do instead of who we are, God's beloved children. Forgetting this, we devise our little systems, set our agendas and get to work.

Isn't this what the Pharisees did? They worked overtime to live by the law, thinking their good works earned their salvation. As a result, they compromised their humanity, especially when they maligned Jesus for showing hospitality to the prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners Jesus welcomed into the kingdom.

We should remember that our ability to work hard to achieve great ends can never make the wind blow or the waves flow. Only God can do that but somewhere along the line we get sidetracked. From an early age, the Protestant work ethic was drummed into our little heads. Don't get me wrong, the Protestant work ethic is necessary keep our society moving forward but only to a point. There's something deeper and more wonderful that keeps God's creation fresh and new. Despite our education and all the human achievements put together, when it comes right down to it, intimacy with God, which spills over to bring about intimacy with our neighbor, is the much better way.

Instead of being a Good Works people Jesus calls us to be the Good News people, celebrating Christ and his gospel as we wait to see what God is up to and then become part of the flow. Soon enough we'll realize that our hard work isn't needed to bring the Kingdom to earth, because the Kingdom is already here.

Follow Mary's example. Sit at Jesus feet and listen to hear that same old story again for the first time. That story is our story and we are the people of God, created in God's image to do marvelous things for Christ and his kingdom as the Holy Spirit prepares the way.

One more thing, always be ready to extend the gift of hospitality whenever God gives the opportunity. And remember, the person you welcome may be Christ himself.