



The Urgency of Hospitality
Second Sunday after Pentecost A 6/14/20
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, take our minds and think through them, take our mouths and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

Beginning in large part with the wonderful and inspiring story we heard in Genesis this morning, the theme of hospitality runs throughout the Bible.

We moderns may tend initially to think of hospitality, superficially, as entertaining guests, as at a festive gathering.

But, of course, it goes deeper than that—hospitality points toward attending to our basic needs for food and shelter, and even more important, our emotional needs for safety and belonging, and, I'm going to say, even justice.

Hospitality takes many forms in the Hebrew Bible.

Acts of hospitality includes the humble and gracious reception of travelers into one's home for food, lodging, and protection; permitting the alien to harvest the corners of one's fields; clothing the naked; tithing food for the needy; including the foreigner in religious celebrations.

The Book of Leviticus includes this injunction from God to the Israelites: “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. *Love him as yourself*, for you were aliens in Egypt.” (Leviticus 19.33-34; emphasis added)

Throughout the Christian Testament, the practice of hospitality is highlighted as a requirement for faithful living.

The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to extend hospitality to all, for one may entertain angels without knowing it (13.1-3)

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul encourages the church to “Do good unto *all* persons, especially those of the household of faith.” (6.10; emphasis added)

The 1st Letter of Peter admonishes us to, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” (4:8-11)

Or my favorite, from Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” (12.20)

Above all, Jesus is our model and inspiration for the expansive hospitality of God.

Perhaps nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus tells us that whenever we offer food, drink, clothing, or shelter to the poor, or care for the sick or visit those in prison, it is as if we are doing this for Jesus himself.

But the Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “hospitality” actually takes this concept to an even deeper level. The word is *philoxenos*.

The first half of the word, *philao*—is the word for brotherly love, as in Philadelphia, City of Brotherly Love.

The second half of the word—*xenos*—is the Greek word for stranger/immigrant/foreigner.

So, more properly understood, “hospitality” – *philoxenos*—is loving the stranger/immigrant/foreigner as you love your own brother/sister/clan member.

But, in fact, it may be even harder than that.

Historically, the Greek word *xenos* has a range of meanings that includes “enemy.” Think of the cultural, emotional and political ramifications of “xenophobia.”

Understanding hospitality in this way is much, much more challenging.

It takes us straight to the Beatitudes: Love your enemies.

Pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5.44)

Make room in your heart for the unlovable and despised.

We might imagine this hospitality in some dramatic, Christ-like ways that may seem utterly impossible, like: making room in one’s heart to imagine loving a white police officer who casually kills a black man; or loving a powerful elected official who gleefully mocks every value and principle that one holds dear; or loving a northerner who wants to destroy symbols that valorize a culture that has comforted one’s family for generations.

But it’s better to start closer to home. True hospitality, like all the virtues, starts in our hearts, with our closest neighbor—which is ourselves.

How do we view ourselves? Can we be open to ourselves as beloved, made in the image of God, marked by the divine DNA? Can we offer hospitality and welcome to the various parts of our own souls? Can we see ourselves with wonder and openness, even and especially the ugly parts, as loveable and worthy of care?

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How about we bend the terms of the discussion just a bit?



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What about hospitality for those whose cries we don't understand, but are not directly threatening to us? Hospitality for uncomfortable history and social dynamics? Can we make room in our hearts to acknowledge uncomfortable feelings? What about this kind of hospitality?

Bishop Tom Shaw, of blessed memory, used to tell a story about his relationship with anxiety.

Rather than drown it in alcohol, he had learned in recovery to live alongside of it, even to befriend it. "Hello, old friend. Have a seat next to me." is how he once described his hospitality for this familiar, uncomfortable feeling.

Discomfort.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've been present at five different demonstrations connected to protesting and seeking concrete change in the current state of race relations in our country.

Four of them were here in Needham, one in Boston.

In fact, if you watched Channel 5 News on Tuesday evening, you may have caught a glimpse of your Rector on City Hall Plaza.

I was standing alongside three other masked clergy from the Needham Clergy Association, and alongside a large contingent of clergy and other leaders from Boston. The "Speak Out" was sponsored by Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries, Boston's oldest interfaith social justice network (dating to 1966) and the New Democracy Coalition.

There were the two demonstrations that took place in front of our church, with people stretching two and three deep in some spots down Highland Avenue toward the center of town, holding signs like Black Lives Matter, "Silence equals Violence," signs with the names of people of color who have died in police custody.

And one of them was a car parade that ran from Great Plain Avenue, up Webster Street, to West Street, with signs, and honking.

And yesterday, one of them took place just across the street on Memorial Field, sponsored by kids at the high school. The field was completely covered with physically distanced young people, and some older folks, some on the bleachers as well leaning on fences.

I confess to feeling discomfort in all of these places.

To begin with, in a couple of cases, I had to interrupt things I was in the middle of to participate; or be late to other things I had already planned.



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I wasn't keen to end up right behind the speaker in City Hall Plaza, much less stand there for an hour.

In some of these places I heard a few things I didn't agree with, that I couldn't clap for, though a couple of times I did anyway.

There were long moments standing in silence with lots of other white people holding signs and wearing masks. We couldn't even make small talk because of the masks.

I heard young people of various races presenting their ideas in ways that showcased their bravery and commitment to justice as well as their developmentally appropriate awkwardness and self-consciousness.

I saw some adults doing the same thing, only sometimes with a narcissism that did not, in my view, help the cause.

As a dear friend of mine with whom I discuss these things keeps reminding me: real justice, real reconciliation, real community, costs everybody something, blacks as well as whites.

I can't speak to what this will cost black people. And I can only have barest inkling, looking from the outside in, of what the price has been for our black siblings for centuries.

And, I can only begin to speak to what it costs white people.

And the first thing though is comfort. A small price to pay.

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There's a sense of urgency in our texts today.

Abraham rushes to show hospitality to his unknown guests, whom the reader knows are the Divine Presence of God.

Jesus responds to a crowd that is harassed and helpless; some translations say confused and aimless.

I think we are confused and helpless when it comes to race, and it's urgent to begin to ask God for help in showing hospitality to the unknown guest that will bless us as we make room for the discomfort.



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It's time to show hospitality to our discomfort and mere inconvenience, so that, even more uncomfortably, we can show hospitality to the ancient cries for justice and compassion that have been amplified in these last few weeks and begin to address them.

So that we can show hospitality to the uncomfortable enterprise of examining the hidden history of people of color in our land.

The Good News is that in extending God's hospitality, we will be the ones blessed by God, and in unexpected, and perhaps even comical and joyful ways. When Abraham and Sarah receive the unexpected stranger, they are rewarded with a miraculous new birth, a gift beyond their wildest imaginings.

And Jesus promises liberation in the Gospel today. Liberation.

I wonder how God waits to bless each of us, and our land, as we expand the hospitality of God in our hearts.

Amen.