

RADICAL HOSPITALITY

“We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.” RWE

OPENING WORDS: “We bid you welcome,” by Richard S. Gilbert

We bid you welcome, who come with weary spirit seeking rest.

Who come with troubles that are too much with you,
Who come hurt and afraid

We bid you welcome, who come with hope in your heart.

Who come with anticipation in your step, who come proud and joyous.

We bid you welcome, who are seeker of a new faith.

Who come to probe and explore, who come to learn.

We bid you welcome, who enter this hall as a homecoming,

Who have found here room for your spirit, who find in this people a family.

Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are on your journey,

We bid you welcome.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

This morning I would like to begin our time of prayer and meditation with a poem, followed by silence, and then a short prayer. The poem is by the 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi. Let us join together now in a spirit of meditation and prayer.

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and attend them all!

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture, still,
treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

— Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-1273)

(Pause)

Spirit of life and light within, among, and though each one of us, open our hearts to whatever this day brings. Let us be grateful for all of the gifts of life, even those we aren't so sure we want.

Help us move beyond fear of the unknown, so we can see the beauty in new faces and experiences. Center us in the knowledge that we are capable of meeting

whatever challenges life brings us. Help us know, deep in our bones, that we are not alone. Amen. Blessed Be.

SERMON

When you hear the word “hospitality” these days, I’m guessing what pops into a lot of people’s minds is entertaining guests, giving great parties, or perhaps Martha Stewart. There’s even something called the “hospitality services industry”—that is, the entertainment and tourism business.

But the word “hospitality” has been around for a long time and it has other, deeper, more spiritual meanings. It comes from two Latin words: *hostis + posse*. *Hostis* means stranger, but it can also mean alien (like immigrant), and can even mean hostile. *Posse* refers to the possession of space. So originally hospitality meant to invite a stranger into your space. This is a big contrast to today’s hospitality, which tends only to refer to people we know and invite into our homes or those we pay so we can stay in their hotels.

I called this sermon “Radical Hospitality” because there’s a lot of talk about this practice these days in religious circles. Radical comes from another Latin word, meaning root. Radical hospitality means going back to the root or origin of the word hospitality and seeking to understand its significance for us today as people of faith.

It turns out that hospitality is an important concept and practice in many world religions. We heard the Muslim story today of the man who fed his coat, because the people at the party only welcomed him after he put on a fancy coat. Other religions have similar stories.

Way back in ancient Greece, there’s the story of Baucis and Philemon, an old married couple who lived in a rustic and simple cottage. Two of the major Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes, came to their town disguised as ordinary peasants. They went from door to door asking for a place to sleep that night. In those days there weren’t any hotels, so travelers had to depend on the kindness of strangers. Even so, they were rejected by all the rich families they asked for help. As the story goes, they found “all the doors bolted and no word of kindness given, so wicked were the people of that land.”

Then they came to Baucis and Philemon’s cottage. Even though the couple was poor, they invited the strangers in and served them food and wine. After awhile, Baucis noticed that although she had refilled her guests’ cups many times, the wine pitcher was still full. That’s when she realized that her guests were in fact gods. She and her husband “raised their hands in supplication and implored indulgence for their simple home and fare.” Philemon tried to catch the goose that guarded their house to cook for the guests, but the goose ran onto Zeus’s lap for safety. Then Zeus announced it was time for them to leave town. He explained that he was going to destroy the town and all the people who had turned him away and not provided hospitality. He told Baucis and Philemon to climb the mountain with him and not turn back until they reached the top.

This they did. When they got to the top of the mountain, they turned around and saw that the town had been destroyed by a flood, but Zeus had turned Baucis and Philemon’s cottage into an ornate temple. The couple was also granted a wish: they chose to stay together forever and to be guardians of the temple. They also requested that when it came time for one of them to die, the other would die as well. Upon their death, they were changed into an intertwining pair of trees, one oak and one linden, forever together.

There are other stories, too. The Hebrew prophet Elijah often went about disguised as a beggar to see how people would treat him. One time there was a young rabbi who was waiting for a very important meeting with the great prophet. When a

beggar comes to the door, the rabbi turns him away. Later he finds out that the beggar was Elijah in disguise. The moral, of course, is to greet all strangers as if you were meeting Elijah because the stranger could well be the one you are waiting for.

The theme of hospitality runs throughout the life and teachings of Jesus. For instance, Jesus says to his disciples: "In my Father's house are many rooms." Most people interpret this as referring to the promise of a room for everyone in the afterlife. But, as Carol Gallagher explains in her blog: "Jesus promises to make room, to make hospitable, livable, and welcome, the realm of God here on earth. Jesus prepares a place for his disciples and we are called to, like them, make a place for others which is welcome and warm." (<http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=897>)

This in essence is the message of Universalism. Jesus welcomed everyone—the tax collector, the leper, the adulterer, women, children, and even the rich man. And we are supposed to do likewise. This is how we help create the kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus's teaching is quite clear. Hospitality is the path to salvation. "For I was hungry," he said, "and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me."

But the people didn't understand. So he explained further: "Just as you did it for one of the least among my brothers and sisters, you did it for me." (Matthew 25 31-40)

There's no doubt about the teaching, but it's a lot easier to say than to do. That's why there's so much talk about radical hospitality these days.

We now live in a world that fears the stranger more often than not. Being suspicious of anyone who looks or acts "different" has even become government policy.

When we were on vacation this summer in Vermont, Donna and I went to a unique comedy show. The comics were a Jewish rabbi and a young Muslim man from Chicago. The show was in a UU church, of course.

Azhar Usman is a large, tall man with a beard. He told some not-so-funny stories about how people responded to his appearance, especially at airports. Born in this country, he speaks with no discernable accent. Yet people see him and assume he is not American. He chooses to laugh at what happens, but I must admit it made me sad.

Much of the current discussion of radical hospitality has been inspired by a book by that name by a Benedictine monk, Daniel Homan, and Lonni Gollins Pratt. They write

When we speak of hospitality we are always addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. Each of us makes choices about who will and who will not be included in our lives.... Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it.... All of our talk about hospitable openness doesn't mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside.... But calling hospitality a moral issue does not tell us the whole truth about hospitality either. A moral issue can become bogged down in legalisms, and hospitality is no legalistic ethical issue. It is instead a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, a way of understanding yourself. Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice and a path to a deeper spirituality.

So what does all this mean for us as a congregation?

When we think about the various meanings of hospitality, we can see that this congregation practices hospitality in a number of ways. We have greeters at the door to make sure both members and guests feel welcome and find out what they need to know about where the restrooms are and where the children go for Sunday School. We have a time during the service where we share our joys and concerns. We have a social hour after the service, where we meet and greet each other and share food. We have a Caring Committee that provides a way for people to help each other in times of need.

We make our facilities available to others in the community through our rental program. And we participate in the Community Table in Lowell where we prepare and serve food to homeless people. All of these are ways we as a group practice hospitality.

Several years ago, this congregation became an official Welcoming Congregation. This may seem like a confusing term. After all, aren't all congregations welcoming? But what you learned during the Welcoming Congregation process was to be specifically welcoming to those people who have often been rejected by society for being gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender people. This special practice of hospitality makes it possible for me to be your minister and for others to be active, involved members of the congregation.

Just this past year, this congregation took another step toward greater hospitality by installing a lift so that those who cannot walk up stairs can share in worship and religious education. Welcoming those with disabilities is an on-going process, and the Accessibility Committee continues to look for new ways to make this place welcoming.

Each time we open our doors to welcome yet another group of people, we expand our understanding of what it means to be human. We give ourselves the chance to know those we might have thought initially would not fit in. And often we learn that we are more alike than different. We discover our common humanity and this helps us feel less isolated.

Rev. Gretchen Woods, UU minister in Oregon, points out that none of us alone is able to offer radical hospitality to every person who comes into our lives or to the church. Fortunately,

... the building of healthy religious community falls on many shoulders. Each of us will find persons here with whom we resonate with positive energy. Each of us will find persons here with whom we can make no useful contact. The beauty of a religious community ... is that there is more room for more types of people to gather and connect.

Some of us need to be challenged and supported to connect with those of whom we are rightly afraid and of whom we are wrongly afraid. This is not easy. It is risky. To be homes of truly powerful personal transformation, we must ... risk our safety some times by meeting those who are different and by listening well and intentionally to who they truly are. We may be surprised to find new friends and learn more about our selves.

So I recommend that you consider hospitality as a spiritual practice, and that you think about ways to expand the circle of those you relate to and welcome into this congregation.

In her new book, *Hospitality—The Sacred Art*, Rev. Nanette Sawyer says that “Becoming a person of hospitality will both center you and open you up; it will help you know yourself better, as well as perceive the richness of creation more fully.” She describes this kind of hospitality as “deep because it comes from our inner core.” She also calls it “transformative,” because “it is centered in our understanding about who we are and how we are related to that which is holy.” She writes:

Transformative spiritual hospitality ... flows from receptivity, reverence, and generosity—three qualities that reflect a basic pattern of movement: in-with-out. Becoming receptive is preparing ourselves to be able to invite others into our lives, our hearts, and sometimes our homes; it is the development of an inner state. Reverence is a state of being with others, honoring and welcoming them, while generosity reflects a flowing out of physical, emotional, and spiritual care. ...

May we deepen our practice of hospitality. May we prepare our hearts to welcome the stranger. May we learn to honor and welcome those who are different. And may we extend our hands and our hearts to others in the spirit of love and care.

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE—Elizabeth Selle Jones

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

BENEDICTION—Philip Giles; adapted from Kit Ketcham

May the quality of our lives
Be our benediction
And a blessing to all whom we touch.

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, and our service to the world begins. Let us go in peace.