

Sacred Hospitality (Mission 2 of 5)
(2 Kings 4:8-14 and Luke 14:12-14)

Personal Testimony: Congregational Member

First of all I want to thank *NN* for his personal testimony. From *NN*'s testimony you can see just how important was the welcome, the acceptance, and the love he received and experienced when he came to St. Thomas'. And St. Thomas' is very good at that. I felt the same thing when I came here (We were made to feel a part of the family). Pray to God we will even get better at it. (Church hospitality can make the difference in a person staying or leaving)

The ministry of hospitality changes lives; even transforms lives. And that's the business we are in, transformation. People's lives being transformed for the better by the experience of God's love.

Through the discernment process the people of St. Thomas' identified **Hospitality** as a Core Value. And rightly so. Hospitality is a means of evangelism. And what is evangelism but sharing the good news of Jesus Christ - in this case through the ministry of hospitality. How important is hospitality?

From the Old Testament

Genesis 18:2-5 – [Abram] looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them... He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves.

Exodus 22:21 -- You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:34 -- The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Job 31:32 -- the stranger has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the traveller.

Isaiah 58:7 -- Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

2 Kings 4:10 -- Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.

From the New Testament

Acts 16:15 -- When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

Romans 16:2 -- so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Hebrews 13:2 -- Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

1 Peter 4:9 -- Be hospitable to one another without complaining.

Matthew 25:40 -- And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Luke 14:13-14 -- But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.

From the Gospel reading we can see that hospitality is more than a way to be friendly, or even welcoming, but a sacred code of conduct that ensures that the needs of the stranger and most especially the vulnerable are protected and met.

Jesus was for everyone, period! Anyone who was considered an "outcast" or deemed by others unworthy or worse, he stood up for them. He especially went out of his way to be with those on the outside of convention. He touched them and ministered to them and reminded them that they are loved, and his **radical** love changed their lives.

Think about it. When newcomers grace our doors on a Sunday morning how do you think they want to be treated? They certainly don't want to feel any apprehension because they are being judged or ignored. What are they hungry for? They are hungry for tolerance and for acceptance, for affirmation and for unconditional love! "People go to the church that is dearest to them and not the church that is nearest to them."

Hospitality is a way of saying, "You matter, you are important!" **Hospitality is God's welcome;** it is God affirming that person through you.

Biblically the business of looking after the stranger and other vulnerable people is a dominant theme throughout scripture, and a key component of that is ancient Hebrew Hospitality. The prophets in particular were often critical of their own people when they wandered away from the God of their refuge who expected the same from them.

God had given rules on the fair treatment of refugees and immigrants; the alien in the land. They were to be treated with kindness (Leviticus 19:33-34); they were to benefit from the same rule of law (Leviticus 24:22); they were to be helped and supported if necessary, i.e., if they were in need (Leviticus 25:35-36); and they were even allowed to join in their national celebrations and festivities (Numbers 9:14).

We cannot underestimate the importance of ancient Hebrew Hospitality in shaping the lives of the people of God, and its influence on us as the people of God. Simply because it is grounded in the Word of God, and their understanding of God as their refuge, strength and salvation. So important was the ministry of hospitality that ancient Hebrews even rebuked their own people when they failed to live up to this sacred code.

Jethro rebuked his daughters because they did not invite Moses, who was a stranger in Midian, to their house (Ex. 2: 20); Gideon punished the elders of Succoth and of Penuel for their breach of hospitality (Judges 8:5, 8); and David demanded hospitable treatment from Nabal (I Sam. 25:8).

What are some of the pitfalls in our own efforts to offer hospitality? What about when we claim a pew, or form clicks, i.e., mix with our own friends; our own kind? What would Jesus' loving response be to that? Think about our Gospel reading and what he said to the Pharisees. And what about when "the welcome" is left to the greeter or sides-person? Would you consider that a breach of hospitality?

In 1977, singer John Charles Thomas, had just completed the second year of a three-year survey on the hospitality or lack of it in churches. After visiting 195 churches He wrote, and I quote, "I was spoken to in only one by someone other than an official greeter and that was to ask me to move my feet."

While there may be people with particular gifts for the ministry of greeting and welcoming, hospitality is the responsibility of the whole congregation. So it is very important that as a core value we create a climate, a culture of hospitality within the congregation; that like the ancient Hebrews we think and act with the stranger in mind, working together as a community.

Some things can only be accomplished in community and by community – a community that recognizes its own brokenness and therefore its need for God. It takes a loving community to clothe people, to feed people, to provide a safe haven, and so on. To be clothed and fed and supported by a loving community -- the church -- is to experience God's grace and mercy.

For that reason it is important that we create the space for that to happen, where friendships are born and actualized. And, that is one of the reasons why the worship space needs to be changed; to be more accommodating – beginning with developing the back of the church. So the vision steering committee will be asking the vestry to sanction the Property/Finance Committee to develop a plan for the church. How can we make this whole space more hospitable?

But back to this core value: Sacred Hospitality. The Greek word for hospitality is *Philoxenos*, which a combination of two words' *philo* meaning love as in love of a friend and the other word, *xenos* meaning stranger. It means to love the stranger like you would your friends; to treat them in the same way. So love and friendship is at the heart of Christian hospitality; a warm, supportive friendship. True friendships are developed within the church community through hospitality. If we are to be a growing, healthy church it will take the whole community to demonstrate true Christian hospitality.

You have heard the expression that the church is a place of refuge, and it is. The hospitality ministry has a way of, not only transforming individual lives, but also transforming our churches into places for those who hunger and need a safe place to sojourn for a while. I want to leave you with this little story from a Lenten devotional entitled, "Meeting Jesus on the Margins. The author writes:

"Every Sunday, after Holy Eucharist, we walk downstairs and find ourselves in a crowded room with people waiting to be fed. Twenty, thirty, forty people waiting... Dorothy oversees this controlled chaos. In the meantime Mark rolls up the window and announces that lunch is ready.

"Sometimes I can smell the alcohol on someone's breath. But I don't think Jesus would care, and neither should I... Some of these folks seem standoffish, aloof, even rude. But I don't think Jesus would care, and neither should I. Sometimes a person smells of tobacco, body odour, even urine. But I don't think Jesus would care, and neither should I.

“Aren’t the free food and the food-bank an extension of our Eucharist? Aren’t Mark and Dorothy and I and the standoffish man in the red T-shirt all part of the same broken body of Christ?”

“I’m not sure if I attend a church with a food bank attached to it, or a food bank with a church attached to it. But I don’t think Jesus would care, and neither should I.”