

“The Power of Hospitality”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Genesis 18:1-15; Luke 24:13-35

Here at St. Luke’s, we know the sacred power of genuine hospitality, and we practice it pretty well. Now that’s not a brag born of pride. It simply honors how the Holy Spirit empowers and encourages us to exercise our spiritual gifts for ministry. When somebody new comes to worship or whatever, we enjoy offering **An Open Welcome**. We feel honored by their presence, excited that they’ve chosen to be with us, and we hope they will become part of our faith family, because we’d like them to feel a sense of belonging, of connection, that can change their life for the better, just as ours have been changed.

Now a cynic might say that’s all self-serving, and sometimes we do get caught in the trap of the Once-ler from Dr. Seuss’s The Lorax, where like him we focus on biggering and biggering just for the sake of biggering. But I think the primary motive – and this is what makes the hospitality authentic, not fake – is that we feel blessed to be part of this parish, where we experience the good news of God’s grace and love, an experience that propels us to share what we have received with others, out of sheer gratitude for God’s mercy.

We see the strength of honest hospitality sprinkled throughout scripture, mainly in meals. Giving a person, friend and stranger alike, food and drink and a place to rest and be at peace for a while was a cornerstone of society in biblical times. This wasn’t a transactional reality anchored in reciprocity, in the expectation that someone will do for me in the future what I do for this person today. No, The Law of Moses required it, and out of obedience to God, sincere compassion arises. In fact, obeying God is the only way we can be filled with love and give it to others generously.

When we offer hospitality, strange and wonderful things tend to happen, not as a result, but more of a side-effect, if you will. Take Abraham and Sarah. Three men appeared at his tent flap, and he humbly welcomed them. “It’s a hot day and you’ve been travelling. Sit down. Sit down in the shade of this tree and cool off some while we put a little something together for you. Sarah, could you whip up three loaves of bread, please? I’m going to grab a calf and get the BBQ going.” He gave them a feast, and their response to his kindness was startling.

First, we notice that they didn’t thank them, which seems rude, but thanks were not necessary. What Abraham and Sarah did just comes naturally to people of faith. But what happened next was really surprising. One of them said something along the lines of, “We’ll be back again someday, and when you see us, the two of you will have a baby boy.” Sarah laughed at that, and who can blame her? She and Abraham were well past the age for making babies, but the one who spoke heard Sarah and called her out, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Now this is where it gets really interesting, because those questions came from the Lord, from God, which reveals that by showing hospitality to those three men, Abraham and Sarah were actually welcoming God into their midst. And wherever God is, new life can spring forth for those willing to accept it. They would have a son, their first together, who would be the heir of the covenant promise God made with Abraham. They called him Isaac, a name which, appropriately, means laughter.

One has to wonder what might have happened had Abraham ignored those emissaries from God or shooed them away or said something like, “I’ve got some stale bread here, and this milk is past its expiration date, but smells OK to me. Go on and have a swig, and let me know if it tastes alright.” What if he had let them pass by unnoticed? How would this couple’s life have

changed, or rather not changed? How would history have been changed? Who would have inherited the promise and kept it alive for generation yet unborn?

Fast forward 1,500 years or so, and we see another couple, Cleopas and his friend, walking away from Jerusalem toward Emmaus. Dejected doesn't even begin to describe how they felt. Everything they'd counted on had come to nothing. They thought Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but he died on a cross, and Messiahs don't do that. That's not how it's supposed to work.

As they mope along, Jesus walks up and asks what they're talking about, and they pour out all their disappointment and frustration. They told him about the stories of the empty tomb, too, and the angel "who said that he was alive," but it wasn't enough for them, because none of the disciples actually saw him. That was the proof they needed, an eye-witness account. Ironically, they were having the eye-witness account they needed, but didn't realize it. For reasons untold, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

Jesus listened, as he always does, even when we're not making much sense. Then he came back at them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe." He opened up the scriptures for them, unleashing fresh insights, revealing that what appeared to be defeat was victory instead, that what happened – unexpected as it might have been – was how things were meant to be.

Well, by the time they reached their destination, Cleopas and his friend still didn't understand, and it would have been easy for them to say farewell and good riddance to this stranger who had criticized them and then acted like an insufferable know-it-all. You have to wonder what might have occurred, or not occurred, if they'd just let him walk on, but they

didn't, and it made all the difference. As Jesus kept walking on, they stopped him, saying "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

Jesus accepted their invitation, as he always does when a person invites him into their lives. They broke bread together, with Jesus acting as host – taking and blessing and breaking and giving the bread, just as he did at the Last Supper, just as he does during Holy Communion. And suddenly, finally, they saw Jesus for who he was. Then he vanished from their sight. Resurrected bodies can do really cool things. In that brief moment, when their vision connected with reality, they saw what they needed to see, a gift received because they had offered Jesus hospitality, and they rushed back to Jerusalem in the dark to share the good news with the disciples, their despair turned to joy.

That's the power of hospitality as it flows from God the source through the giver to the recipient, and back again, because when we accept hospitality – and that can be tougher than giving it – we bless the giver, and both giver and receiver praise God. The power of hospitality changes lives. It changes history. And it all starts with the hospitality of God.

Jesus welcomes us all, each and every one, sinners who are forgiven, loved, and free, made clean by the waters of baptism, nourished by bread and wine, born anew in the Spirit, alive to possibilities that seem ridiculous, because our eyes have been opened. We are witnesses to the Risen Christ, and that gives us the vision to see God's reality and the courage and strength to pursue it as agents of God's purposes.

The power of hospitality surges through St. Luke's, but we want to magnify it. God wants it magnified. So several years ago, the people of St. Luke's caught sight of a vision and never let it go, and that's why over the past three months, we've prayed for God's guidance to

lead us together in faith to make sacrifice, so that we can create a place that conveys the same welcome as our people.

Today, we celebrate that process and God's presence in it. That's what we're celebrating. Not a number. We need the number to make the vision a reality, and we rightly rejoice in what God has wrought through us, but today we celebrate what the number symbolizes, the faith kindled by the Risen Christ alive in us, a faith we are called to share to help change people's lives for the better, to help shape the world, to make history for the glory of God. Amen.