

On Hospitality

Matthew 10:40-42

The story is told of a man who owned a general store in Kansas. He was a well-intentioned man who made a habit of offering a verse of Scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. The group of people who sat around the store in this rural area enjoyed the exchanges, because some of the purchases challenged the imagination.

One winter day a Texan stopped in, and wanted to buy a blanket for his horse. The locals knew that the store stocked two types of blankets. One sold for \$60, and the expensive one cost \$89.95. He showed him the first. "No, that's not good enough. I need something warmer for my horse." He showed him the second blanket for \$89.95. "That's not good enough, either. Don't you understand? This is for my horse, and nothing's too good for my horse. Now show me your most expensive blanket!"

The store became very quiet as the storekeeper reached under the counter to the \$89.95 stock, pulled out a plaid one, and spread it on the counter with great finesse. "This is our finest and the only one I have. Colorfast, 100 percent wool, with a very tight weave. It sells for \$250."

"Now you are talking. I'll take it." He counted out the money, folded the blanket, and left with a big grin on his face. As the shopkeeper opened the cash drawer and carefully counted the money, he said, "Matthew 25:35, 'He was a stranger and I took him in.'"

Hospitality, reaching out with a cup of cold water, is sometimes hard to find.

A Jewish proverb says, *"Hospitality is one form of worship."*

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of a righteous person.

Explicit in the words of Jesus is the promise that, if you show hospitality, you will get a prize; in fact, you'll get the same prize as the person receiving your hospitality. Here's how it works; if you offer a meal to a prophet like Jeremiah, who was a great prophet, by the way, then you will get whatever reward Jeremiah gets, which is probably a pretty good reward. And if you offer a ride to a righteous person, you'll get the same reward that he or she is going to get. So it seems that the real challenge in this life is to figure out who the important people are – who the people are who have big rewards coming in heaven – and show hospitality to them. That is one logical conclusion of Jesus' words today.

That is, until the last verse in our gospel lesson, when Jesus throws us a curve. Did you hear it?

Whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones – truly I tell you – none of these will ever lose their reward. The point Jesus is making is this: if there is something to be gained by us showing hospitality, it's not hospitality. If we are only kind to those of wealth and power, it's not hospitality, it's bribery. If we only show hospitality to our relatives and friends, it's just paying them back. *But, Jesus said, if you so much as give a glass of water to a child, you will never lose your reward.*

Children in Jesus' day were of little or no value. People did not walk around town with a sign on their back that said "My kid is an honor student at Jerusalem Middle School." Children were nobodies in that culture, and there was nothing to be gained by being nice to them, and yet Jesus says that is the ultimate act of kindness. This, says Jesus, is hospitality; when you care for the little ones.

Look at scripture; in almost every instance, when Jesus is speaking about kindness, or generosity, or hospitality, or welcome, he isn't describing what ought to be done for the rich, or the famous, or the powerful; he is saying this is what ought to be done for the powerless ones: the children, the grieving, the discouraged, the desperate. If you show hospitality to these little ones, your reward will never be lost.

Many people go out of their way to teach the children that they are welcome here. They are welcome, they are important to us, and they are loved. That is the most important lesson of each week.

You may know that the word hospitality comes from the Latin word *hospital*. Throughout most of history, a hospital was not a place where someone went to be healed. Until recent decades, a hospital wasn't a place where you went for some life-saving surgery. A hospital was a place to be comforted...a place to be fed, and loved, and touched, and cared for, until you died. Another word from the same root has shown up in our contemporary language in recent years: *hospice*.

The purpose of hospice workers is not to cure their patients, but to make them as comfortable as humanly possible. Hospice workers are angels in disguise, and their reward, as Jesus promised, will be great.

It seems to me that God calls the church to be a hospice to the hurting people of this world. Instead of spending so much time and energy pointing out people's sins, criticizing them for their flaws, condemning them for their lifestyle, and excluding them until they become religious like us...instead of judging them, hasn't God called us to love them? Hasn't God called us to be on the lookout for the weakest, or the oldest, or the youngest, or the poorest, or the most lonely, and offer a cup of water to them? God's call is to make them comfortable, but if it makes us uncomfortable, we often ignore God's call. And I think that breaks God's heart.

When I was a child, we lived in Buffalo, NY, and our home had a front porch, as did most places in our neighborhood. I remember nights in the summertime, sitting on that porch with my mom and dad, watching the people go by. My folks would talk to them as they passed. "How are the kids, did you find a job yet, what did the doctor say, did you hear about Ed on the corner?"

Houses aren't built with porches anymore; they have decks, in backyards, with fences; so we are insulated from people we don't know...and therefore, we never get to know them. If God has a porch, I'll bet it's in front; right on the street...and God can see the people pass by, and God knows their circumstances. And if somehow we could sit on the porch with God and see what God sees, we would be moved to action. We would be handing out water by the buckets full, not to fix their problems, not to cure their diseases, but simply to show kindness, and grace, and hospitality.

Jim Somerville was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. Once one of the most prominent churches in our nation's capital, it is still housed in a wonderful, ornate facility. However, there are few people who come to worship there anymore.

Washington has had one of the highest populations of homeless people in America. They're everywhere, and sometimes they take refuge near churches. Jim couldn't help but notice that a group of homeless people were spending their nights on the church's property. In an effort to be hospitable, and to put a human face on homelessness, he and another young fellow from his church took their sleeping bags and spent a night with these people who had no roof over their heads.

They had to endure an initiation process, as if being homeless is a fraternity. First of all, if they were going to relate to these people, they would have to give up the sleeping bags. Nobody else had them. They were instructed as to how to make a good bed out of cardboard and to use other materials to insulate their "home." In the course of questioning their new friends, the pastor and his idealistic deacon asked them what were their greatest difficulties. The answer was obvious... where to go to the bathroom. And since there were women in the ranks, it was especially difficult for them.

So, the next day, Jim ordered a portable toilet to be delivered to the church and placed nearby where this group of people slept. It did not – how shall I put this – it did not go over well with some of the good folks in the congregation. A day or two later, a padlock appeared on the outdoor facility... courtesy of the grounds committee, or someone else "in charge." The pastor was asked "What are you going to do about it?" "Oh," he responded sadly, "the toilet will have to go."

But that's not the end of the story. Here's the interesting thing... One of those homeless men managed to get his life back together. He joined that church and developed into one of its most active and committed members.

You never know, you just never know, what might happen when you extend a hand or even a cup of water – or a portable toilet – to someone in Jesus’ name. You see, you never know who that stranger may be at your door.

In our lives, when it comes to hospitality, we take turns being the host and being the guest. Sometimes we are the ones who simply need the hug or the cup of water and kindness comes. Other times, we are the ones providing the hot dish, or the coffee, or the comfort.

The suburban church I served in New Jersey was home to several Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups that met in various rooms in the building. One night, I was leaving the church at the same time a meeting of NA was adjourning. I found myself in conversation with a man standing next to his car, and introduced myself as the pastor of the church that had hosted his group. The man sighed and told me how long he had intended to “get back to church.” So I invited him to worship. Immediately, the man launched into a story of his life.

It was the familiar story of regrets and loss that accompany addiction. We talked for awhile, and then parted ways.

As I walked across the parking lot, the man called out with a sense of urgency. “Did you mean what you said?” “About what?” “Did you mean that I could come to this church?”

I realized the man had told me his life story as a way of explaining why he couldn’t come to church. He felt he wasn’t “clean enough” to be included in our kind of congregation. I never did see him in worship.

How clean does someone have to be before he or she is accepted by Jesus? How clean before someone is accepted by you and me?

In this inhospitable world of ours, Jesus would have us throw caution to the wind. You can’t do that without opening the door. And when you do, you might just find Jesus standing there disguised as a stranger.

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