



Holy Hospitality
Matthew 10:40-42
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My father tells the story of when he was a young graduate student, traveling from Texas to study at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He had received a fellowship which came with a sponsorship from a local family. He was to stay with that Scottish family for a few days to get acclimated before moving to the university dorm. On his first night at their house, he was exhausted by international travel... and very cold. Well, it finally came time to sleep, and he navigated the foreign electrical switches in the guest room and, shivering, found his way to the bed. He flopped down, exhausted, ready to get some good sleep when he stretched out his legs and **screamed!** There was an animal under the covers!

Hearing the scream, his host scrambled up the stairs to his room and asked what was wrong. My dad told his Scottish host about the animal under the covers and the host...just started laughing. And, she pulled up the blanket to reveal: a hot water bottle complete with hand-knitted cover. Not an animal at all, but an act of thoughtful hospitality meant to warm my father's cold, tired feet.

We probably all have stories of well-intended hospitality gone wrong, but those occasional missteps shouldn't keep us from embracing the call to hospitality found throughout scripture. Much of Jesus' ministry, in fact, was about extending welcome. Especially to strangers. Especially to the vulnerable.

To set the context for today's reading, Jesus has gathered the twelve disciples and is giving them instructions before sending them out. It's sort of like a World Cup locker room speech – the team's been training with Jesus for a while, but now it's finally time for them to go out on the pitch themselves and share the good news.

I wonder how the disciples were feeling at the time, because some of the instructions are intense. Jesus says they can't take money, or a bag, or sandals, or extra clothes. And with Jesus' blessing, they're to proclaim the good news, cure the sick, cast out demons, even raise the dead! Pretty awesome stuff, all in all.

Which brings us to today's passage about welcome.

Jesus says:

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 the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

Matt. 10:41-43

A cup of cold water, in Jesus' day, would have been a rare treat. Early each morning, women went to the village well to draw water for the day. Coming from the bottom of a deep well, this water would be clear and cool. But just a few minutes in the hot Palestinian sun would melt even a block of ice.

So you might offer your dinner guest water — but not cold water. For that, someone would have to run to the well and back, fast, before the sun warmed it again.

Yet Jesus goes further. He says, "Whoever gives even a cup of cool water to **one of these little ones**" will receive their reward. "Little ones" would have included children, but more broadly "little ones" are those of *little* standing in society: the unappreciated, the poor, the disabled, the prostitutes.

Offer that cool thirst-quenching glass of water, Jesus says, even – no, **especially** – to those little ones of society. Hospitality extends to all, Jesus says. Love does not play favorites.

Brother Daniel Homan in his book, *Radical Hospitality* writes:

Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not a mere social grace; it is a spiritual and ethical issue. It is an issue involving what it means to be human. All of our talk about hospitable openness doesn't mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside." (p.5 as quoted in "The Art of Welcome" by Trace Haythorn: <http://day1.net>)

Or, as Arthur Sutherland puts it simply: "Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls."

There's a scene in *Theo of Golden*, the hit novel by Allen Levi, that illustrates this sort of welcome and the discipleship it takes. The scene features Ellen, a bright, eccentric, book-loving woman who struggles with mental health and at times lives rough, outside on the streets of the Golden. Ellen relies on her most treasured possession, her bicycle, to navigate town. And she never lets her bike out her sight.

Well, one Sunday Ellen shows up to church at St. James. Now, she's a *bit late*, arriving right as the pastor is about to read the scripture lesson. The congregation hears a loud...shall we say *uncouth* conversation in the lobby. It's Ellen, with her beloved bicycle of course, giving the usher a piece of her mind.

The usher is suggesting – quite reasonably mind you – that it isn't appropriate for Ellen to wheel her bike **into** the sanctuary in the middle of the service. But Ellen, angry and pointing at the "All Visitors Welcome" sign has a very different idea. She eventually ignores the usher and walks straight down the center aisle of that church with her bike by her side.

Well, as is not surprising these days, someone calls the police and sirens start up in the distance when a matriarch of the church, Mrs. Ocie calmly stands up, smiles, and warmly invites Ellen to sit with her family in her pew. They'd make space for Ellen *and* her bike beside her. Well, it turns out Ellen is looking for Mr. Theo, the protagonist, and he also welcomes Ellen and they find a pew, pop down the bike's kickstand – setting it right there in the aisle – and the rest of the service goes on without a hitch.

The police are called off, and it's decided that in future weeks, Ellen will be more than welcome and encouraged to store her bike by a pew in the back, so it doesn't impede Communion. The church witnessed the welcome of Jesus that day. The pastor didn't need to preach a word.

There's a reasonable, safe interpretation of today's lesson: Jesus praises those who welcomed – those who practice hospitality – so the church following that tradition must be a welcoming place. Christians in our workplaces, our neighborhoods, in our homes, we must seek to carry on Jesus' teaching by showing hospitality to all. Especially to the least of these.

That's all well and good. A worthy lesson from our passage – the church **should be** a beacon of welcome, our pews, our doors, open for all of God's people with all their burdens and joys, rainbows and ribbons, baggage and bikes.

My sense, as a relatively new member in the life of this congregation, is that we share this goal. It's hard — we need each other, and we'll make mistakes along the way. But we at Broad Street strive to be a church with a welcome as warm as Jesus' embrace.

Yes...welcome! ...**and**. And, I think Jesus is up to something even bigger here.

The news recently highlighted the opening of the Obama Presidential Library in Chicago. But seeing the presidential pictures, my mind went back to President Jimmy Carter, who passed away six months ago now. After his presidency, Jimmy Carter spent nearly four decades building houses with Habitat for Humanity, hammer in hand well into his nineties. That's the part everybody remembers – and boy is it powerful! – the former leader of the free world on a roof, in a hardhat, looking more carpenter than statesman.

After reading more about Carter around his death last year, a detail about this work with Habitat stuck with me. Not about what happened during the workday, but after.

In 2010, after the earthquake in Haiti – the one that left over a million people homeless – Carter and his wife Rosalynn went to Haiti to build houses. The volunteers stayed in a campsite kitted out with sleeping tents, a dining tent, a shower area, and all around were Haitian families and volunteers also living in tents and makeshift shelters of their own.

At the end of the workday, the Carters didn't eat apart from everyone else. The Carters waited in line for supper at the dining tent, side by side everyone else – volunteers from all over the world and Haitian families who'd never had a decent place to live. And they sat down at folding tables for supper. Together.

Now, Habitat's whole philosophy is built on a notion: sweat equity. They don't just give people houses. The families who receive homes work alongside the volunteers – hundreds of hours of labor, on their own home and others' – and they pay back an interest-free mortgage. There's another term for it: partnership housing.

It's a refusal to let anyone stay only as recipient. The families receiving housing aren't merely hosted by charity, recipients of welcome. They also *host* the build. They feed the volunteers. They work alongside the people who come, supposedly, to help them. At the end of the day, sitting around the table, it can be hard to even know who's hosting whom.

Which brings us finally back to Matthew 10.

When Jesus sends the disciples out with no money, no bags, no extra clothing it means before they can offer anyone a cup of cold water, they have to first receive one. The disciples are dependent, vulnerable, in need of someone else's hospitality just to survive the journey. The ones carrying the mission are ones who need to be received by those they seek to serve.

Jesus isn't just commissioning a welcoming church. He's dismantling, in advance, the hierarchy that usually comes attached to welcome, the assumption that the *powerful give* and the *vulnerable receive*.

In the end, for Jesus, hospitality isn't a one-way street. It's not a gift that the strong hand to the weak, or the other way around. Holy hospitality is a posture neighbors share – sometimes as host and other times hosted, switching around as part of God's holy surprise.

Because what Carter knew, sitting in that dining tent. What Ellen and Theo show us, that Sunday when she wheeled her bike down the center aisle of St. James. What my father stumbled into, half-asleep then *wide-awake* in a stranger's house in Scotland.... they all landed on the same thing: **with the Spirit's support, hospitality doesn't stay put.** The chair you pull up for somebody else today is the same chair somebody pulls up for you tomorrow.

That's the welcome Jesus is after. A table where, sooner or later, every one of us takes a turn at being the guest. A world where the first is last and the last is first and welcome is always on the menu.

So go from this place ready to welcome the stranger. And go just as ready to *be welcomed* — by the ones you least expect to host you, in places you assumed you'd only be giving.

And at just the right moment, may that cup of cold water find you. *Amen.*