

“What Is at Stake in Simple Acts of Hospitality”

Matthew 10:40-42

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As I have said in writing and to many of you more personally, Dana and I had a wonderful ten days in Scotland. There are many things to love about that country including its history, the breathtaking beauty of the land and the fact that it almost never gets any warmer than the mid-sixties. But somewhere very high up the list of Scotland’s attributes is the genuine warmth of the people. If we were rating countries for their hospitality on a one-to-ten scale, Scotland would have to rate a ten!

Of course, there are two sheep for every human being in the country which may make it a bit easier to be welcoming. Other than in Edinburgh, Glasgow and perhaps Aberdeen, the land is not overcrowded. But still, the people are incredibly warm and generous in their acts of hospitality. Every Bed and Breakfast owner was, of course, very welcoming with words and helpful details about each specific area, as well as a welcome beverage connected to the country. “When in Scotland...” as they say. They even offer a splash of whiskey with porridge at breakfast, fortification for the blustery days, you know...

But it was not just the proprietors who were friendly; it was seemingly everyone in the country, including two men on a bus in Edinburgh whose brogue was so strong we could only pick out select words but whose help was genuinely friendly, a woman on the streets of Sterling who had change in coins for a five-pound note so that we could pay for parking, and the farmer near the Clava Cairns who took us to see some Highland cows or coos as they are called, even if he did expect a wee donation to help feed them. Even the French couples sharing a table with us in a pub in Inverness were reasonably friendly! The people in Scotland are so warm and gracious that it cannot help but affect you.

Now, I realize it may seem like all of this is lovely, helpful even if you are thinking about going to Scotland, but not worthy of inclusion in

a sermon. Hospitality is a mundane social matter, not a significant concern for Christian discipleship. But if we take Jesus seriously, this is simply not the case. According to him and the long tradition of Judeo-Christian thought, hospitality is a key measure of faithfulness.

It begins in the book of Genesis where there is a series of stories about hospitality, including the story about Sodom and Gomorrah. As Rabbi Solomon insisted on a Wednesday night this past spring, the issue with these cities is not what some claim today, but rather an appalling lack of hospitality, the gross mistreatment of guests who turn out to be angels. This has been the interpretation of rabbis for thousands of years.

The concern with hospitality continues in Leviticus and extends to the stranger in the land, the alien, the immigrant. It is also found in numerous other places in both testaments, including the book of Hebrews which instructs Christians to show hospitality to strangers, noting that in doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it (13:2), a clear reference to the Genesis stories.

Finally, this concern for hospitality is seen throughout Jesus' life and ministry. He often becomes the host, even in other people's homes. He welcomes everyone around him, especially those on the margins of society, and says that those who welcome the stranger and feed the hungry welcome and feed him. And he encourages his disciples in numerous places to pay attention to who welcomes them.

Today's reading from Matthew 10 is one example of this. Jesus begins by saying that whoever welcomes his messenger welcomes him and whoever welcomes him welcomes the God who sent him. This raises the bar significantly on what is at stake in how we welcome various messengers of God, not just ministers and missionaries, but all who represent Christ. If we welcome them, we welcome God and Christ. If we do not, we reject God and Christ.

Then, Jesus goes on to add this one brief yet significant word – 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. “Little ones” might refer to children or to anyone considered to be of little concern to society at-large, because Jesus extends hospitality to all. And here he calls his disciples to do the same.

So, what is the message for us? There is a more than we think at stake in simple acts of hospitality. There is a sign of our faithfulness to God. For we may be extending kindness not just to strangers and little ones, but to angels. In fact, we may be welcoming welcome Christ himself. Thus, this is no simple, mundane matter of little significance.

To be clear, we're not talking about who throws the biggest party, who gets the reward for being the finest socialite in town, who shows up in the most pictures in *Walter* magazine. We're talking about who is warm and gracious in greeting other people, welcoming all, but especially those who might not be welcomed by everyone, the "little ones" of our society – the poor, the stranger, the outcast, the immigrant, the refugee. There is much at stake in what we offer in the way of hospitality as individuals, as a church and as a nation.

I have known many individuals with a gift for hospitality. I think of a couple of families in a church in Louisville, Kentucky who welcomed youth into their homes and extended an extra measure of hospitality to me when I was a newcomer. It is always awkward coming into a group where most people know each other. It is even more awkward when you are fifteen years old. And it is crazy awkward when you have never been in any church before while everyone else has been there since before they were born. But families like the Yorks and Armstrongs had a gift for making everyone feel welcome. It didn't hurt that Martha York's cheesecake was the best on the planet! But there were many ways in which they extended hospitality.

I also think of my college roommate's grandmother whom I have told some of you about before. Officially speaking, we went to nearby Georgetown many Sundays to hear Granddaddy preach at the Nazarene church, but the real reason we went was to take in Nanny's hospitality. The main attraction was her cooking which was magnificent, but her genuine warmth was just as inviting as her cooking. You always got the feeling that nothing made Nanny any happier than you showing up. You knew you were welcomed and loved. She had a gift.

But I have not always been on the receiving end of hospitality. I have provided it at times and I have observed it being extended to

others. For example, in one setting where I served, there was a family that always took in others around holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. If there was a student from another state or country, someone who had just gone through a divorce or someone who had been in and out of homelessness, anyone who had no one to be with at the holiday, they would take them in, invite them to their dinner table, sometimes even to stay overnight. It was a simple yet profound way of extending grace and friendship to people who needed these things.

You have known people like this too. Many of you are people like this. You have the gift of hospitality. It is something we can extend as individuals, and when we do, we do more than offer human kindness; we prove faithful to our calling to serve as representatives of Christ.

But while we can each extend hospitality to others on our own, there are also many ways in which we extend hospitality as a church. We might think of families we have hosted this week through Family Promise, families for whom we have provided meals, a place to stay and companionship. Or we might think of the welcome we provided to roughly fifty children this week through Vacation Bible School, our own children and many guests as well.

Or we might think of the hundreds to whom we extend hospitality through our clothing ministry each week, including immigrants and refugees. Or we might think of the groups we welcome into our space to do significant ministries – the Step-Up job training program, multiple addiction recovery groups, anger management groups, the Infant Toddler Center and our own Weekday Preschool.

And before all of this, there are the people we welcome to our space and extend grace to every day, people in need of financial assistance, someone to listen to them or people with whom to study, pray and worship. One of our guests last Sunday was a Marine who is walking across the country to raise awareness for VA Healthcare. There are many needs we try to address, but it all begins with hospitality, simple acts of welcome, a cup of cold water given to the little ones.

But as we think about ways we extend hospitality as a church, we ought to include the ways we do this with other Baptists through the

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In Raleigh, Lawrence Powers extends welcome to college students through a new CBF campus ministry, and Marc and Kim Wyatt extend welcome to refugees through an array of ministries. They are often the first welcoming faces newcomers fleeing horrific circumstances see. It is the face of love, the face of Christ.

And of course, this ministry of hospitality we share in through CBF takes place not just here, but in places all over this nation and world – in urban Miami and rural Arkansas, in Lebanon and Macedonia where refugees from the war in Syria are fleeing, in Indonesia and Malaysia where human trafficking is a daily reality, in Romania and Kenya and so many places of great need.

Many wonder why we need denominational frameworks like CBF at a time when local needs are great and resources are limited. There are many reasons, but at the top of the list is the basic fact that there are people in this world who need a cup of cold water more than we do. We cannot all go to provide it nor can what is needed most be provided by partnership work. Long-term, culturally-sensitive followers of Christ are needed and they cannot sustain their presence without our help.

The good news is we provide help. We were listed in the last Fellowship newsletter as one of the top twelve churches in the country in supporting the Offering for Global Missions. And our recent gift of \$35,000 to the Capital Campaign helped push CBF over the \$12 million goal. We are all needed to provide this kind of hospitality.

So, we can extend hospitality as individuals and as a church, and then, we can extend hospitality as a nation. I realize this is a volatile subject right now and we have a well-founded desire to stay away from political matters in the partisan sense in much of church life, especially worship. Ironically some who share our name are trying to tear down the wall between state and religion and thus allow direct political endorsements from pulpits. It's not only difficult to see the long-term benefit in this; it is impossible to see how it squares with our heritage.

I have no intention of breaking our tradition. I have no desire to comment here on public policy, though as a private citizen, I have strong opinions and the freedom to express them elsewhere. But setting

policies aside, we have a long history of welcoming outsiders. We are a nation of immigrants, except for a few of us with Native American blood. The rest of you are aliens! But for reasons that have some basis in reality, we are struggling mightily to live up to our heritage.

As individuals and as a church, we can welcome the people who come our way, but we cannot welcome those who are kept out or sent away. And some of those who are being affected are people we know and love – clothing ministry clients who are afraid to come out, people we know or their family members who are being deported, relatives of Pakistani refugees in our church who cannot get in to the country.

Fear of the other has led us to this place of inhospitality. And again, to be clear, the fear is not unfounded. There are dangerous people in this world and there are some who take advantage of hospitality.

To return to Scotland, the Glen Coe region is breathtakingly beautiful with fast-rising mountains sprinkled with volcanic rock and green mixed in, but the region is also haunting. It is known as the Valley of Weeping partly because when it rains, which is most days, waterfalls stream down the sides of the mountains, and partly because of a massacre that took place there in the evening of February 13, 1692.

There is a long and complicated backstory, the issue being the timing of an oath given to the king, but the bottom line is that a number of soldiers, some from another clan in Scotland, acting on English orders, took advantage of Highland hospitality offered by Clan MacDonald. After being sheltered and fed by their hosts, they got up in the middle of the night and slaughtered thirty-eight MacDonald clansmen and left forty women and children to die of exposure after burning their homes. It was a horrific massacre remembered to this day.

There are risks associated with taking people into our homes, churches and land. No one in their right mind would deny this. Anyone with any sense wants all appropriate safety measures to be taken. But when they have been, when we've done all we can in the way of vetting, the question remains as to whether we are willing to extend hospitality.

The truth is, while we say we have a rich heritage in this regard, we actually have a mixed record. We began by brutalizing the native people who lived in this land. We “welcomed” many as slaves for

hundreds of years. We refused entry to many Jews fleeing the Holocaust and put in internment camps many with Japanese heritage during World War II. Emma Lazarus' words from the sonnet "New Colossus" may be printed inside the pedestal on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free..." and we may have lived up to these words at times, but at times we have not.

It is not an easy matter, this business of hospitality offered by us as individuals, as a church and as a nation. It is not an all or nothing debate, as most of our public discourse seems to assume. But at the end of the day, whatever those in public life decide, our calling as followers of Jesus is clear – to give a cup of cold water to these little ones, to extend hospitality to those who need it, even if risks are involved.

Jesus extended hospitality to everyone without counting the cost. He even welcomed into his inner circle of twelve one he knew would betray him, but he welcomed him anyway. What might that say about our acts of hospitality and what is at stake in them?