



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

OCTOBER 5, 2014
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Unbending Ourselves Genesis 18:1-16; Matthew 25:31-46

As our worship began this morning, I asked you to think about what it is like to be a stranger. At some point in our lives, perhaps on many occasions for some of us, we have been a stranger. How did you feel? What were you thinking? How did other people react to you? How did you react to them? What did you wish had happened?

I clearly remember being a stranger five years ago. I was on sabbatical and had arrived at a conference on spirituality in a beautiful mountain setting designed to inspire wonder and closeness with God. Expecting the kind of easy fellowship intended by such gatherings—and which I had enjoyed at another religious conference just the week before—I found instead an atmosphere of old friends reunited after a year apart. There was an abundance of existing, comfortable friendships but not a lot of space for new ones. Mealtimes, which are usually the best opportunity for meeting new people, were offered in a space that resembled a restaurant more than a dining hall. Dining took place around small tables designed for families or small groups where asking to join someone felt more like intrusion than welcome. The lectures and workshops and worship were wonderful, but I quickly realized that something about the conference also generated feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, alienation, fear, and even anger. I was a stranger and no one took me in.

Please don't misunderstand. The folks at this gathering were friendly, to be sure. They were good people—Christians all. Their praying was sincere. Their singing was enthusiastic. Their devotion was pure. Their desire to grow in faith and in Christlikeness was genuine. Most, if not all, of them were from the South where we pride ourselves on hospitality. What I began to learn that week, which was not the designated theme, was that our congenial sense of hospitality and the kind of welcome demonstrated in scripture are often quite different. If we are not attentive, our cultural sense of hospitality can wear our biblical obligation to hospitality rather thin.

Although we do not often talk about it, hospitality is a core virtue of the biblical story. From the accounts of God creating a place in which he

communed with humanity to the stories of the Patriarchs which stress the importance of welcoming the stranger to the greatest of all acts of hospitality—the Incarnation—“God’s welcome,”¹ as Professor Amy Oden calls it, hospitality permeates the Gospel. It is this welcome, this attitude of hospitality, that we are to emulate in our own life of faith and ministry.

That is why Moses urged the Israelites to remember their own experience before entering the Promised Land to claim it as their own. He reminded them:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

“You were strangers.” These three words are the foundation on which the virtue of hospitality is built. The Hebrew people were constantly reminded that from the time Abraham and Sarah left their home in Haran until the Israelites entered the Land of Promise hundreds of years later, they were strangers. They did not belong. They were constantly reminded that they were “not from around here.” They were not to forget those feelings and experiences especially when dealing with other people who were strangers to them. Nor should we.

But who are the strangers referred to in scripture? Dr. Oden, who teaches at Saint Paul School of Theology at Oklahoma City University, points out that a stranger is anyone who is vulnerable: the sick and the poor, the widow and the orphan, travelers and foreigners, slaves and prisoners. These are people who lack the connections and resources to live sufficiently in difficult times. It is no surprise that these are also the people whom Jesus identified in his parable on hospitality which is our Gospel lesson today:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at

¹Amy Oden, “Hospitality as a Spiritual Practice in Ancient Christianity and Contemporary Ministry,” *The Reavis Lecture Series*, Campbell University Divinity School, September 30, 2014. Much of the source material for this sermon was provided in Dr. Oden’s lectures.

the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:31-46

We tend to think that this passage is about ministry, about the immediate meeting of needs, but Jesus' intent is much deeper. The parable is about true hospitality, about living the Gospel, about seeing Jesus. The parable claims that we see Jesus in the face of the stranger, the poor, the prisoner, the hungry, the ill, the guest.

Again, we are directed back to the earliest stories of our faith when humanity was created from the elements of the earth but distinct from every other living thing. You will remember that as God conjured up what humans would be like, he said, "'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness' . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26a-27).

We are created in the image of God! It is this one distinction that both sets us apart and binds us together. We all bear the image of God. So does the stranger who appears at our door as well as the person struggling to

make a living on a part-time, minimum wage salary who is stuck in poverty. The person who is ill with the Ebola virus, the child who is orphaned by war or addiction, the traveler who needs money to get to the next town, the newcomer who is searching for a spiritual home, even the radical Muslim who wants to eradicate us from the face of the earth—all bear the image of God. And so do we.

We quickly realize that Gospel hospitality is more engaging than the gracious welcome we have learned from our Southern forebearers. It is more attentive than the example promoted by the hospitality industry which provides a feel good experience in exchange for increased patronage. Hospitality, in God's eyes and hands, is more than a polite welcome, a tasty treat and refreshing drink, and an invitation to come back for more.

Scripture demonstrates that true hospitality is intentional and curious. We plan and prepare to be open to someone else. We are genuinely curious about their life, their needs, their destination. We are willing to risk what we have for what they need and realize that welcoming someone else into our lives will bring change and disruption to us.

Earlier we heard the story of Abraham and Sarah and the strangers who appeared at their tent under the oaks at Mamre. The story reads as if Abraham was looking for travelers, expecting someone to appear. When they arrive, he immediately invites his guests to rest, provides water to wash their feet, and prepares a feast to feed their hunger. Oddly, Abraham himself waits upon these strangers, something the head of a household would never do at that time. He risks accepting these men at his home for he does not know who they are. They could have been robbers or intended him other harm. As it turned out, they were emissaries from God and their visit changed Abraham and Sarah and the rest of us forever. They brought news of the fulfillment of God's promise and the beginning of a lineage that would bring us Jesus.

God's hospitality is like that. It changes us because we are open and expectant. It blesses us even more than the person we have attempted to serve. Ultimately, it allows us to see God in the face of the strangers who come into our lives. You may remember that line in Jean Valjean's dying confession in the musical production of *Les Misérables*. Valjean, once a thief stealing bread to save his starving nephew, a businessman providing jobs for poor workers, a mayor treating people with justice, and a father righting the

most grievous wrong of his life, declared on his deathbed, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”²

Julianus Pomerius, a fifth century monk, recognized that his own spiritual disciplines—fasting, praying, studying, working, keeping silent—sometimes made his own guests uncomfortable and unwelcome. He determined that he needed to “unbend” himself from these disciplines in order to practice hospitality for others and for himself.³ In other words, when someone ventured into his life on purpose or by accident, he needed to “unbend” himself, to set aside his own comfortable routines in order to meet the needs of the person who was before him.

By unbending ourselves, we interrupt the routines and behaviors which are comfortable for us in order to be open to the needs of someone else. We welcome the stranger and learn more than her name. We discover her hopes and fears and wants and needs. We provide a space where that person can rest and be refreshed. And we provide what is needed so that she might be sent on her way to realize the abundant life God has desired for us all.

When I think of genuine hospitality, I think of the Interfaith Hospitality Network which operated here while the Bassett Center was being built. Along with a dozen other congregations, we provided space in our buildings for homeless families to live. We brought in food, shared meals, washed clothes, helped with homework, made referrals for work, and spent the night in our Youth Building so that families who were vulnerable were enabled to get on their feet and on their way. It was time consuming. It was tiring. It was expensive. It was risky. Above all, it was a blessing for everyone who participated because we experienced God’s presence.

On this World Communion Sunday, when we remember the ways in which we are connected to Christians around the world, it is good for us to remember that we were once strangers until God welcomed us into the family of faith. It is good for us to be attentive to other people who are strangers to us in whatever ways. It is good for us to remember that we are simple “Pilgrims thirsty,”⁴ strangers who knock on God’s door and are welcomed to a feast of grace. How good when we unbend ourselves long enough to see Jesus.

²Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel, with an English-language libretto by Herbert Kretzmer, *Les Miserables the Musical*, 1980, based on the novel by Victor Hugo, 1862.

³Julianus Pomerius, *The Contemplative Life*, as cited by Amy Oden.

⁴Zebulon M. Highben, “Come to Me, All Pilgrims Thirsty,” Augsburg Publishing Co., 2008, text by Delores Dufner, Liturgical Press, 1992, 1996.

October 5, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Gracious and merciful God, we are gathered in your presence to celebrate and remember the greatest of all gifts, the grace you have poured out abundantly through the coming of Christ among us. When he took on human form, he was despised and mocked, yet he loved and accepted all he encountered. When he walked among us, many rejected him from their tables, yet he invites all to feast at his table. When he taught us of life in God's kingdom, he was accused and put to death, yet offers pardon and abundant life to all who will receive him.

As we prepare to gather at the feast that is set before us, we confess to you, Righteous God, that we have not extended the same compassion and hospitality that has been granted to us. We have feared or refused the stranger because we have believed our resources too meager. We have stereotyped the stranger as suspicious or dangerous or inferior because we did not make the effort to understand. We have been too busy trying to impress our important guests, thereby serving our own needs, instead of demonstrating welcome to the ones who could not repay our kindness. We have overlooked the beauty in those who speak a different language or wear different clothing or hold different beliefs or opinions and have often failed to recognize your image in them. For these and all the times we have rejected those we have been called to love and to serve, thereby rejecting you, have mercy on us, O God.

Make us worthy, we pray, to sit at Christ's table as his friends. In this meal which unites us, not only with our brothers and sisters in this hour but also with the saints of your Church in all times and places, let our weary hearts be revived and our hungry souls be fed, that nurtured in your hospitality, we may feed others both with physical nourishment and with the bread of true friendship. Give us ears to hear the beauty of your promises in the voice of each one we meet. Give us eyes to see the gifts you have placed within them. Give us minds agile enough to imagine justice for those who have known oppression. Give us hands strong enough to accomplish your work. Give us feet courageous enough to follow you wherever your children need to know of the light and life you offer. As we gather around your table and as we go out from this place, give us hearts open enough to extend hospitality to both friend and stranger, recognizing that in so doing, we welcome you into our midst. Amen.

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