

Jon Hauerwas – October 9, 2016 – A Place of Welcome  
Genesis 18:1-8 and Matthew 10:40-42

As I was arriving as your new pastor, the outgoing interim shared some of his thoughts with me about the congregation, as is customary. Among his observations, Conley described Westminster as “reserved.” And while I have certainly found this to be true, I also believe that this insight helps to explain my own level of comfort with you. By now, you may have noticed that I am friendly but not extroverted, that I am passionate but not effusive, or that I can be quite introspective, though never at the expense of good humor. A close seminary friend once told me that, upon first meeting me, he thought that I was reserved.

Meanwhile, it is often said in my profession that if a pastor and a congregation are to be successful, then they must be a good fit for one another. This likely means sharing similar theological perspectives, general preferences for worship and even, I imagine, consistent temperaments. In other words, if a congregation is reserved, and the pastor is constantly pushing the boundaries of what most deem to be normal and acceptable, then their partnership is not likely to last for very long. Alternatively, if the congregation’s identity is dominated by change and risk taking, but the pastor is typically cautious in new situations, then both the pastor and the congregation are on the fast track for frustration.

And yet, if this “reserved” designation is true for Westminster’s pastor and congregation, then where does this slow and steady, “look-before-we-leap” mentality come from? In his commentary on the Old Testament book of Genesis, Terence Fretheim argues that North Americans “live increasingly isolated lives, seldom reaching out beyond a very close circle. We live in a self-protective age where parents often warn their children about strangers; who knows what might be lurking beneath a kind and gentle façade? Hence, we seldom move out toward strangers.” (pg. 464) Next, Fretheim focuses on the primary theme of our worship this morning, saying that “hospitality in the modern world involves some risk.” (pg. 464)

And yet, despite our best efforts at self-protection, we can’t help but serve. Westminster hosts visiting youth groups, internet safety seminars, and musical concerts. We are home to a YMCA daycare and a Senior Independence adult daycare. We host the League of Women Voters, Westside Vocal Academy, and the Infinite Legacy Project. Westminster opens its doors to Alcoholics Anonymous and Bridges out of poverty, and serves a free dinner to the greater community every third Sunday. Later this month, our church is hosting the Disciplefest event for our Presbytery.

As I think about hospitality, I am reminded of my maternal grandmother. She was a dynamic, energetic, Southern woman who never met a stranger. She came from a working-class family. Her father died when she was a child and her step-father was elected and re-elected mayor for many years.

Grandmother was a well-respected, opinionated leader at her church and throughout her community. At home, she was “the hostess with the mostess,” the organizer of large, family events. She was always on the go – setting tables, cooking, cleaning, and inquiring about her neighbors and friends. She decorated the church with flowers, took meals to those who lost loved ones, and hosted countless receptions in the fellowship hall. She attended endless meetings, served as a spokesperson for Presbyterian Women, and was concerned about helping the poor. My grandmother once received a civic award naming her “Woman of the Year” for her servant’s heart and tireless efforts to improve the lives of others.

Still, it would be easy to distance ourselves from the call to go and do likewise. We could say, for instance, that times then were simpler, and that welcoming others was not always fraught with such risk. We could consider the cultural norms associated with urban and rural life, or highlight the differences between the more reserved North and our more hospitable neighbors to the South.

But, pretty soon, we would explain away the point - that hospitality is a virtue. And moreover, that we are, at times, called upon to acknowledge and perhaps even work against our own personality types and deeply ingrained cultural and congregational expectations in order to provide a fitting place for God to dwell.

Jesus demonstrated hospitality by including gentiles in the covenant and by sharing meals with so called sinners. He was also the recipient of hospitality as a guest at parties and in the homes of others. You may recall that one woman bathed his feet with an expensive perfume.

Meanwhile, early Christian teachers, like Paul, were constantly on the move. Wherever they went, they relied upon the generosity and welcome of local Christian leaders to house them as they preached the gospel in these locations. Each act of kindness strengthened them for the mission at hand.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, the author writes “let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This is similar to the Old Testament

emphasis upon treating even foreigners well. Remember that you were once aliens in the land of Egypt.

And in our first lesson this morning, it is Abraham, advanced in years, who is the exemplar of hospitality which is graciously extended to to strangers who appear unexpectedly in his midst. Abraham goes out of his way to make them feel comfortable. He sees, runs to meet, honors, invites, refreshes, prepares, and serves them. The text says that he gives his best - a calf! He personally makes and serves the food, remains available to the visitors while demonstrating concern for their welfare, and accompanies them on their way. (pg. 463)

This is the kind of welcome that my grandmother would have offered. And it is the kind of hospitality that has been extended to me by countless individuals throughout my life in the form of well wishes, words of thanks and affirmation, genuine kindness, meals, assistance with projects that were beyond my capabilities, gifts, lodging and on and on and on. These are the kinds of things that people do to show us that we are not alone, that our lives matter, that we are valued.

Today, we extend God's welcome through the sacrament of baptism and reception of new members.