

Welcoming Strangers Luke 24:13-35

Some time ago I attended a seminar hosted by the District on the topic of Christian hospitality. Its focus was on helping churches to do a better job of welcoming and including people. The reason for the seminar was the recognition that congregations, like us, are trying to do ministry in a society that is culturally diverse and politically polarized. Just turn the radio or TV to any news show to see just how polarized we are, with the fighting between our elected leaders.

During the seminar, we talked about Pope Francis and how he was shaking up the Roman Catholic Church. He surprised many people by saying that he would not focus on abortion, gay marriage, and contraception. He felt that the Church had become “obsessed” by these issues. Instead, he wanted to pursue an inclusive church, not a small church that can hold only a small group of selected people, but one that is “the home of all.” Just this past March, Pope Francis again mentioned, “The Church is not a home for some, it’s a home for all”.

If that sounds familiar to you, it parallels the Scripture verse found in Isaiah 56:7, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

While it may appear the pope is moving the Roman Catholic Church in a radically new direction, he really is not. He is refocusing attention on the ancient practice of Christian hospitality. This is an approach that Jesus takes in today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke - when he appears to his disciples as a stranger, and then a guest, and then as a host. Each of these roles can provide guidance as we try to do a better job of welcoming and including people in the life of the church.

Jesus as a Stranger:

When two disciples are traveling to the village of Emmaus on Easter afternoon, the risen Jesus comes and walks with them, but their eyes are kept from recognizing him. Jesus asks about the events they’re discussing, and one of them says, “Are you the only

stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (v. 18).

Jesus is initially seen as a stranger, which gives the disciples the challenge of showing hospitality. They practiced *philoxenia*, which literally means “love of the stranger.” *Philoxenia* is one of the Greek words used in the New Testament for hospitality and stands in stark contrast to the attitude so prevalent in today’s society - *xenophobia*, “fear of the stranger.”

What would it mean for us to practice *philoxenia*?...Well, we do it every time we teach a student in English classes offered through an ESOL program. We do it every time we speak to “strangers” in the narthex before worship and after worship, instead of chatting only with our friends. We do it every time we make an effort to get to know a person from a different race, culture, or nationality.

This is *philoxenia* - love of the stranger. When we practice it, we discover that strangers really aren’t so strange.

Jesus as a Guest:

Fortunately, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus rise to the challenge of hospitality. As they come near their destination, Emmaus, Jesus walks ahead as if he is going on. But the disciples “urged him strongly saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over’” (v. 29). So Jesus goes on to stay with them, and he becomes their guest. They welcome and include him in their lives, and invite him to stay with them...

Jesus wants us to take good care of the guests who come to us. He challenges us to feed the hungry and welcome outcasts as he did throughout his ministry. Since we, the members of the Church, are the physical body of Christ in the world today, we’re supposed to be his hands and to continue his work. We show his presence in the world

every time we practice hospitality in his name, whether we're feeding the hungry through our food pantry or welcoming a guest to a worship service.

Guests are important to Jesus, which is why he played that role on the road to Emmaus. He wanted to challenge his followers to see him as a guest and take good care of him.

There's a scene in the gospel of Matthew that stresses the importance of this kind of care. In the final judgment of the nations in Matthew 25, Jesus announces that he frequently appears to us as a guest. Specifically, he comes in the form of people who are in need of food, drink, and a welcome. He says to his followers, "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" (vv. 34-35). While the followers of Jesus, in this story in Matthew, hear these words, they're confused. They don't remember seeing Jesus and helping him, so they ask, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry ... thirsty ... a stranger?" Jesus answers them simply, "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" (vv. 37-40).

Jesus comes to us as a guest, even today. When we help a person in need, we're really helping Jesus. And this happens not only in church, but on the street, and at work. When you help a person in need, you're helping Jesus.

Jesus as a Host:

Notice what happens next on the road to Emmaus. Jesus, the stranger, becomes a guest of the disciples as he accepts their invitation to stay. But then he quickly changes roles. While he's sitting at the table with them...he becomes their host - he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them...Then their eyes are opened and they

recognize him - and he vanishes from their sight (vv. 30-31)...The disciples discover that, when they welcome a stranger, they welcome the Lord.

The role of Jesus changes from stranger to guest to host as he sits at the table and breaks the bread (v. 30)...This transition continues to happen today - when the risen Christ nourishes us through the communion of the Lord's Supper. As the bread is broken, we're invited to open our hearts to the presence of Christ. He comes to feed us, and to fill us with his power and his presence.

The passage ends with the two disciples racing back to Jerusalem to share the news of their experience with the other disciples. They tell them what happened on the road, and how Jesus "had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (v. 35).

Their message is a proclamation, a declaration, an affirmation...and it's something we're all challenged to do.... To simply talk about how we've experienced the activity of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit...It's going to be different for each of us, and differences are fine - they are part of the diversity of life in a church that is a home of all.

When we practice Christian hospitality, we become part of a mighty spiritual movement - one that can overcome divisions in a terribly polarized world. It all begins when Jesus breaks the bread, our eyes are opened and we recognize him. Amen.