

Practice Hospitality: The Positive, Practical, Progressive Message Gospel of Jesus

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Well it is September and this time of year always makes me think about the holidays. What do you remember about holidays as a child? I remember the food. I remember that for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner there was always a children's table. I never could figure out if the children's table was a good or bad thing...Was it to exile us from the bigger celebration and the world of the adults, or was it to make us special—our own table to be free to make as big a mess as we wanted and to be as loud as we wanted.

The passage we heard from Mark's gospel today features a child. Actually there are two children that get mentioned in the larger chapter of Mark. Earlier Jesus and Peter and James and John come down off the mountain after Jesus has been 'transfigured' by a dazzling brightness to find the other disciples arguing with a crowd of people. In the same manner that Jesus asked the disciples in our passage for today, he says to the disciples in the crowd, "What are you arguing about?"

It turns out they are arguing with the crowd because in Jesus' absence they have not been able to cure a child with epilepsy. So Jesus has to do it and when asked about it later by his disciples he claims, "This kind of healing can only come about by prayer and fasting."

In our passage for today we find Jesus away from the crowds in a house with the disciples and he notices they have been arguing again, and he asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

The question itself turns the disciples into children. They are silent, they don't answer Jesus because they know they have been arguing about a naughty thing: who among them will be the greatest.

Jesus is aware of this and he tells them that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Then he places a child among them, and while embracing this little one Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me...."

Jesus ends their argument by teaching them about hospitality. You see, in the ancient world children, like women, were held in low esteem, seen as nothing more than property. That is why we find passage after passage in the Bible requiring the care of orphans and widows. Like today, children are some of the most vulnerable in our society with regard to poverty, hunger and disease.

Jesus sets this vulnerable one in the middle of the disciples with an embrace. His actions indicate that truly 'welcoming' this child or anyone who is the 'least of these' means that we ***create space in our own dwelling places to share who we are as well as what we have.***

Throughout history, fear of the stranger—the one who is different because of their race or religion or appearance or sexual practices—has led to hostility instead of hospitality. This fear continues to fuel violence and genocide in our world today. Yet God commands us to love, not

fear, the stranger. Why? Because we too have been strangers. **John McNeil has said in his book *Taking a Chance on God*** that hospitality should be a natural spiritual practice for GLBT people because we know the pain of being a stranger. (And we know how to throw a good party!) But more than our empathy, the reason we should practice hospitality is because of God's hospitality and welcome of us. Our practice of hospitality flows out of the welcome we have received in God's love. Ephesians 2:19 tells us, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

Scripture tells us that our offer of hospitality, our love of the stranger is to be concrete. Deuteronomy tells us we are to love the stranger in our midst by offering food and clothing. Psalm 23 tells us that we are also to offer shelter and protection—preparing a table in the presence of enemies. In the ancient world hospitality was necessary for survival because travel was so dangerous. Travelers, strangers, could be robbed or killed by bandits and thieves, so hospitality—offering food, shelter, and protection from hostile forces—was practiced by everyone because you never knew when you might be that traveler in need of care.

This notion of hospitality was brought home to me a few years ago when I made a trip to Denver. I fell in the Denver airport as I was running to catch a tram to baggage claim. I was on my hands and knees in this moving tram with blood dripping on me and the floor, dazed after I had hit my head. Several people helped me up and gave me tissue to wipe my cut, but one young woman offered hospitality. She took me by the arm and said, "I have some time before my next flight, let's get off at the next stop and I will take you to airport security so you can receive medical attention. She physically held me up and kept asking if I was OK until we reached someone in airport security that could help me. Her practice of hospitality has inspired me to be more consistent in my practice of hospitality. Love the stranger because you too have been a stranger. Practice hospitality because you too have received hospitality.

Diana Butler Bass has written a book on the importance of spiritual practices such as hospitality for progressive Christian congregations. **In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*** she demonstrates that while fundamentalist groups may be stealing the language of Christianity, there are those congregations across denominational lines who are experiencing the positive, practical, progressive message of the gospel of Jesus Christ by engaging in spiritual practices such as healing, worship, justice, testimony, and hospitality.

What does it look like when a church practices hospitality? How do we love the stranger? Hospitality is not the same as 'friendliness.' Our friendliness tends to wear off when people are not friendly back or are unfriendly to us. Hospitality is not the same as 'fellowship' or socializing. We have wonderful gatherings around food all the time in MCC and that is a good thing. But that is not the same as feeding the hungry and homeless who are the strangers of our society. For many of us the church is our social outlet, but throwing a good party is not the same as hospitality.

Hospitality is the creation of space—in our hearts and in our church community—where strangers can become friends. We often say in our churches that all are welcome, but we need to be careful that our welcome doesn't just mean "anyone can come to church here as long as they don't make us too uncomfortable or they are not too disruptive." That kind of welcome is about 'tolerating the stranger' not the practice of hospitality. **True hospitality creates a space in which we allow ourselves to be changed by the stranger. It recognizes the holiness of the stranger.** The practice of hospitality creates a space of mutual exchange between guest and host. Did you know that the Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament can be translated as both 'guest' and 'host?' And that is often what happens in the spiritual practice of hospitality—the one offering it often becomes the one to receive something from the guest.

In her book, Butler Bass tells the story of an Episcopal church in Washington, D.C. that decided to host a service for 200 homeless people every Sunday morning at 8 am that included

breakfast, worship and a small group bible study. People who came were served food by the members of the church on real plates and had their coffee cups refilled by church members who served as 'waiters.' At first the members called the people who attended 'the homeless'. Gradually they began calling them 'guests.' Now they call them 'homeless members' or 'our members who live on the streets' or by their names—Joe, Wanda, Ted.

At first this special service had no offering because church members didn't feel right about taking up a collection from homeless people. But the homeless members insisted that their service should include a traditional offering—they wanted to give back to the church. One regular member who was serving as an usher one day at the homeless service became moved during the offering when he saw poor people turn their pockets inside out putting their loose change and crumpled dollars into the offering. He said that he learned more about giving that morning than in a thousand sermons. ***The spiritual practice of hospitality creates a space for host and guest to give and receive—to change places and to be changed.***