"Paying Attention to Hospitality"
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 10/18/26

In her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris shares an anecdote about hospitality. She writes:

> Saint Benedict, writing the sixth century, notes that a monastery is never without guests, and admonishes monks to "receive all guests as Christ." Monks have been quick to recognize that such hospitality, while undoubtedly a blessing, can also create burdens for them. A story said to originate in a Russian Orthodox monastery has an older monk telling a younger one: "I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, 'Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?'"

When you hear the word hospitality, what comes to mind? I think about our own hospitality committee, the good people who organize coffee hour for us, making sure that things are just so, thereby enabling the rest of us to relax and enjoy each other's company after worship. Or when we hear the word hospitality we might think about the so-called hospitality industry, hotels and restaurants, that sort of thing – the business of service. You pay good money and in turn you expect a certain level of attention and care, a certain kind of hospitality.

In the Apostle Paul's day, and even until much more recently than that, depending on where you were in the world – in the past, hospitality carried different connotations, a different set of expectations. In Paul's time, you could not necessarily expect to pay good money in exchange for a comfortable hotel room to sleep in – they just didn't exist the way they do now. So if you were traveling, you might need to knock on a stranger's door and ask if you could trouble them to let you stay in their home. The Benedictine monks and nuns Kathleen Norris references were expected to practice this kind of openness to strangers in the medieval period, being ready at any time to provide a meal and a bed in the monastery for people passing through.

Closer to home, my own ancestors started the Seven Stars Inn in Phoenixville – their farm was at a crossroads and apparently people knocked on their door so frequently requesting to sleep in the barn that they decided to turn this regular act of hospitality to strangers into a business. In the past, not only could you expect a stranger to open their home or at least their barn to you, you would be expected to do the same for others, to be ready and willing to welcome a stranger in your home in return. Hospitality was a kind of reciprocal system of welcoming the stranger as a guest – it was an expectation, a cultural obligation, even.

The word hospitality itself reflects this history of reciprocal welcome. The Latin root word, *hospes*, means guest or visitor, but it could also mean person *receiving* guests. Host or guest – the word was the same for the person on either side of the welcome. As Merriam-Webster puts it in their etymology for the word hospitality, "a person serving as guest on one occasion would act—and be expected to act—as host on another occasion to a visiting former host." From this root *hospes* we also get words like hospital, hospice, host and hostel, as in the inexpensive place to sleep. But going further back in the etymology, we also get from the same pre-Latin root the word hostile – as in oppositional or unfriendly – because one who is a stranger could in fact turn out to be an enemy.

Throughout the Bible, hospitality is lifted up as a virtue that people of faith should practice, in part for practical reasons: in a world without hotel chains, where else are you going to sleep? But it is also lifted up for theological reasons. And those theological reasons are the Apostle Paul's concern in today's reading from Romans 12. This whole chapter is an exhortation to Christian living – an ethical manual of sorts, a how-to guide for those seeking to follow Christ in their day-to-day living. Each of Paul's instructions in this chapter could be the subject of a whole sermon – let me know if you'd be interested in hearing that series, or if you have questions about the whole heaping burning coals thing at the end. But smack dab in the middle of Paul's list of Christian duties is this exhortation to pursue hospitality to strangers. In chapter 15 Paul will go on to say, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you. The Roman church is having trouble with that. As far as we can piece it together, the Christian community in Rome had started out as a culturally and ethnically mixed group. There were people from Jewish backgrounds and people from Gentile backgrounds following Christ together as one body. But in the year 49, the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, and in the five years until they were permitted to return, Roman culture came to dominate the church. By the time Paul wrote his letter, the Jewish Christ-followers, now back at home, were feeling excluded, marginalized within the community.

Over the course of Romans, Paul invites this mixed group of people who make up the church to understand themselves as a new community – a new community already reconciled by the saving work of Jesus Christ. He encourages them to live that identity as a reconciled people by relentlessly pursuing reconciliation in their daily lives, both within the Christian community and outside of it. Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, Paul says. Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality to strangers – pursue hospitality to strangers, until those strangers become friends, enfolded in the community of care.

Even in the structure of Romans 12 itself, Paul is practicing what he preaches, trying to help this divided community recognize one another's gifts and come to see and treat each other as family. Paul writes this chapter in a traditional Hellenistic style of paraenesis – exhortations to ethical living, reminders of what's important – a mode of address that would have been familiar to the culturally Greco-Roman believers who had come to dominate the church in Rome. But he fills in this Hellenistic exhortatory structure with wisdom from the Jewish tradition, directly quoting the Biblical books of Deuteronomy and Proverbs, and adding allusions to the prophet Amos, the intertestamental literature of Sirach and Tobit, and even – unusually for Paul – directly referencing the words of Jesus. By doing this he shows that the Romans do not have a monopoly on ethics – they are to welcome the wisdom of their fellow Christ-followers from Jewish backgrounds. These two groups are to live as one united community, each welcoming the gifts of the other tradition, just as Paul has been able to bring together two different streams of wisdom literature. The various groups within the church are to practice hospitality toward one another.

Hospitality – it's more than making sure there are enough cookies for everyone at coffee hour, though that is an important task, to be sure. True hospitality – Christian hospitality – requires us to be open to the needs and ideas of others. It requires us to welcome one another with the kind of grace with which Christ welcomed us, grace that was willing to suffer and die for us, to descend to hell for us to make sure we were included in the family of faith. Christian hospitality requires us to give of ourselves in the self-sacrificial way Christ gave himself for us – and in the process, to trust that as we give from our gifts for the benefit of the stranger, others will be ready to do the same for us.

For the next several weeks we will be exploring hospitality in our sermons: exploring God's hospitality toward us and God's invitation to be blessed by extending hospitality to one another; we'll be exploring hospitality as a Christian virtue and a Christian practice, an integral part of the faith we try our best to live out together.

I chose this theme for us because of the Master Planning process we are undertaking as a church family. As we consider our congregation's ministry and our building's needs, the many different projects we might undertake don't always seem to fit together: putting new flat roofs on Widener and Strouse, finding a way to adequately heat and cool our classrooms for the comfort of our students and teachers, increasing safety and ensuring that everyone can access our spaces, no matter their ability or mobility – on the surface, these things don't have a ton in common. And a lot of the work that needs to be done will be invisible to the naked eye, hidden behind the walls or beyond view on the roof.

But as I think about what draws these disparate projects together, the word that comes to mind is hospitality. We want to provide warm hospitality to everyone who walks through our doors – we want to provide warm hospitality to everyone who walks through our doors, whether they are here for worship or a learn-to-play Mah Jongg class or preschool. We want to provide warm hospitality to everyone who walks through our doors, because that's who we are as a congregation, and that's what God in Christ calls us to do together: to welcome the stranger, so that the stranger can become a friend, enfolded in the community of care. All the things we're talking about doing with our building, they would help us provide hospitality. Spaces that are comfortable to be in, easy to access, lovely to look at – these things all help us provide warm hospitality to our neighbors. So in the coming weeks we'll be paying attention to hospitality – and a lot of hospitality is paying attention, by the way. We'll get into it.

A minute ago I said that Christian hospitality was more than making sure there are enough cookies for everyone at coffee hour. I said that – but yesterday, I officiated the wedding of Michael Cooke, son of Peter and Jean Cooke. And after the worship service in the chapel, we all came into the narthex for coffee and cookies; pretty standard offering from our perspective. But a while later, after I had retreated upstairs to my office, I heard some folks from the wedding talking as they were leaving through the Sanctuary, and their voices floated crystal clear on our terrific acoustic, so I could hear as plain as day: "they give you cookies after the service here? And coffee and tea? Maybe we should convert!" So cookies might be the secret to hospitality after all. At least they're a start. And proof of the power of a simple gesture of welcome.