

Leadership Letter

Entertaining Angels?

On a recent trip to London with the usual delays and missing passengers, the cabin crew exemplified the heart of hospitality. We received a warm welcome, there was attentive care in helping the elderly with their hand luggage and they created an environment with their open body language that communicated value to each individual. Though I purchased nothing from the drinks trolley, one of the crew members gave me a glass with ice and lemon so that I could cool off my warm bottled water! I know you are all wondering what airline is that!!!! Of course they are being paid to offer such service but it felt genuine and despite delays they created a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere. That crew fulfilled one of the definitions of hospitality which state, "Gladly received, as one whose coming gives pleasure"

Hospitality was once a central part of the Christian community and living as a Christian. Before inns, hotels and restaurants, every stranger needed someone's hospitality. Travelers were dependent on the kindness and generosity of others who very often were strangers to them. Many biblical texts reflect this understanding. For instance, the wonderful account of Abraham and Sarah offering hospitality from their home to three strangers who turned out to be angels (Gen.18). This story must provide the background for the Christian instruction on hospitality from Hebrews 13: 1, 2 (The Message).

"Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it."

Much of Jesus' life and many of His significant conversations took place in homes informally fellowshiping and sharing in food and drink. The purpose of meeting was not primarily to accomplish a task but to deepen the friendships growing closer together, sharing their lives and passion for God. No one did hospitality better than Jesus. And no one did more to bring equality between host and stranger than Jesus.

Some years ago I was travelling with a team to a gypsy village and we found ourselves as strangers, in need of a coffee. We were 7 foreigners in a tiny room and our host, a dear woman sent her son out into the neighborhood to retrieve chairs, cups and extra water! We gratefully received her generous kindness and this enabled her to bless us with the little she had. Hospitality establishes an interdependent and reciprocal relationship that requires us, whether we are the host or guest, to view the stranger as a valuable child of God.

Jesus' first miracle takes place while He is a guest at a wedding feast and He miraculously provides expensive wine from huge jars filled with water. Jesus can certainly never be accused of being a minimalist! His provision is over the top,

providing more and better quality than expected. His hospitality is extravagantly generous. Even though He possesses no home, He provides meals for over 5000 people in the country, uses an upper room in the city and cooks fish on a beach. He takes initiative and invites Himself to others homes where, as a guest, He underlines the heartbeat of hospitality. "You are of value and of inestimable worth not because of your status, class, race or education but because you have been created in the image of God."

A couple of years ago our daughter brought a friend of hers from her dance college to our house in Spain for a holiday. He'd never been on a plane or out of the country and his background was marked with incredible challenges and disappointments. She showed him his room upstairs and minutes later he came running down holding a welcome card in his hand. He asked me if I had written the card and put the basket by his bed. When I responded positively, he threw his arms around me with gratitude being so touched by the thoughtfulness of a welcome card and gifts. He had no Christian background and over the days together, as we enjoyed meals and conversation, played games and swam together, he blurted out to my daughter "What is your Mum like?.....is she like, Jesus?" He caught me on a good week! But haven't we all been inhabited by the hospitable Christ? This young man was experiencing God's unconditional love through our family. As Paul says in Romans 12 "...don't just pretend to love others. Really love them."

John Wesley had a requirement for the members of cell groups he was establishing - 'one deed of kindness everyday'. He went further than that though and encouraged his members to fulfill the following challenge:

*Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
At all the times you can
To all the people you can
As long as you can*

For Christians, hospitality is not to be an occasional gesture but a whole way of being. It is not an interruption to our normal life but a habit, practice, or value that needs to consistently characterize our lives. We all live in and from the hospitality of God. This should cause us to be people of gratitude and generosity. It's an overflow of God's goodness to us that enables us to reach out and love others with His liberality. Opportunities for hospitality frequently come to us as 'interruptions' in our task orientated culture. This often requires a rethinking of our priorities. The challenge of being hospitable is to be able to set self aside and make room for another by having the attitude of Christ. Paul reminds us of this in Philippians 2.

"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too."

This is true servant leadership. In our communities, how are we cultivating the kind of welcoming spirit Jesus personifies? Do we have open hearts and open homes that provide places of calm and rest in the midst of the storms of life? Do we leave space in our diaries for the unexpected opportunities to extend a meal to a stranger or neighbor or a discouraged team-mate? Celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, and achievements together can deepen our friendships and cause genuine love to flourish.

One of the Desert Fathers used to say, "There are three things we honor: the fellowship of Holy Communion, the hospitality of meals, and the washing of one another's feet."

This autumn let us creatively find a way we can put at least one of these honorable expressions into practice on a weekly basis and expect our communities to grow in their love for one another. Who knows we may even entertain angels!