

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
June 18, 2023
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

Welcome, welcome to Zion! As always, it is a joy to be here today and spend time together in praise and prayer, in reflection and fellowship. After worship, we will do what we always do: we'll share in a time of refreshments and the opportunity to connect with one another. We will offer one another hospitality. Offering hospitality in the ancient world was more than a polite nicety or a way strengthen relationships; hospitality was a matter of life and death.

Travelers passing through a town would gather around the village well at sunset and townsfolk would go out to offer food and shelter. That might seem strange and even dangerous to us today, but in the days before Super 8 and Motel 6, this type of hospitality was a part of a sacred code of conduct, an obligation of the highest order in most cultures and faith traditions.

Throughout scripture the importance of hospitality is underscored. Abraham and Sarah discovered that they had welcomed God when they set a feast before three strangers; prophets found that they had entertained angels unawares, and Jesus said that to offer even a cup of water to one who is thirsty is to offer it to him.

The word Hospitality comes from the Latin word 'hospes' which in varying contexts can mean either host or stranger. Hospitality then is the relationship between a host and a guest, and is a deep part of what it means to be human. In Hebrew, the practice is called *hachnasat orchim*, meaning "welcoming guests". Besides other expectations, *hosts* are expected to provide nourishment, comfort, and entertainment for their guests, and at the end of the visit, escort their guests out of their home, wishing them a safe journey. In many cultures, the expectation of hospitality also includes protection. A host is to ensure that a guest does not come to any harm when in their care.

When visiting a Muslim friend, I was surprised by his children jumping up and down as I came in the door. It was explained to me that with every guest, a thousand angels enter one's home. The children knew that they were welcoming not just guests, but angels as well.

Author Diane Butler Bass makes the point that NO ONE can call themselves Christian unless they practice hospitality to strangers... "Would that every faith community was like a swarm of bees," she writes, "running out to meet the displaced, the lost, and the unexpected strangers with the same delight, zeal, and alacrity as the earliest Christians."

Pope John Paul II wrote, "Welcoming our brothers and sisters with care and willingness must not be limited to extraordinary occasions but must become for all believers a habit of service in their daily lives." A habit of service in our daily lives. By this definition, hospitality goes beyond food, shelter, and entertainment. Hospitality then becomes the foundation of every interaction we have-with those that we know, and especially with those we do not know.

It is the willingness to be open to the needs of others, where ever we meet and however we happen to connect. But, according to the Pew Research Foundation, Americans have been found to have less trust in one another over the past generation. This has impacted how we see other people-viewing others as threats and not as our brothers and sisters in Christ. One has only to drive on a highway or read a newspaper to see that the treatment of others continues to degrade. Did you know that disregard for the safety and well-being of other people which includes disrespect, manipulation, lying, lawlessness, or reckless actions is actually the definition of antisocial personality disorder from the American Psychiatric Association?

And yet there are so many stories of how the hospitality of strangers have changed lives for good. A text message on Thanksgiving to a wrong number led 16 year old Jamal Hinton to come to dinner with Wanda Dench. They have been celebrating the holiday together now for 8 years. During the blizzard in upstate New York last winter, 10 South Korean tourists spent two days with Alexander and Andrea Campagna, who answered the knock on their door and offered hospitality. They recently had a reunion in South Korea. The New York Times reported that “Tears were shed as they encountered each other again. Guests and hosts alike, channeled through an interpreter, spoke of the gratitude they felt. They now call each other lifelong friends and repeatedly emphasized that it felt like destiny to have met.

As theologian Letty Russell once noted, “The word for hospitality in the Greek New Testament is philoxenia, love of the stranger. Its opposite is xenophobia, hatred of the stranger. Philoxenia turns strangers into friends.” And this can repair, heal, and change the world.

How can we make hospitality a habit of our daily lives? One way is the foundation of Benedictine spirituality and the largest part of the Rule of Benedict: All guests are to be received as Christ. What could it look like: to treat every person we encounter as though we were interacting with Jesus Christ? For one, we would be truly present to them, attentive to them and their needs. We would be welcoming, and extend grace, forgiveness, and compassion in each encounter. We would be less likely to take one another for granted. And we could extend grace, forgiveness, and compassion to ourselves as well. Hospitality is a spiritual discipline that we can practice, and daily practice can turn it into a habit of service in our lives.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you welcomed all who came into your presence. You have invite all to your table, and into your arms. May we reflect that same spirit through the practice of hospitality. Amen.

