

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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**God's Welcoming Hand**

Luke 14:1, 7-14 & Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

At a conference in 2001, the Rev. Maake Masongo, a South African church leader who lived through the terror of apartheid in his country, said:

Hospitality, whether given or received, is never simple; especially when it has to be experienced with 'my friend the enemy.

Masongo described his encounter with a former prison guard who had tortured him in the days of apartheid in South Africa. He said the guard told him,

I only did that because I believed in my heart that you were terrorists! I had to save the country from being ruled by people who didn't love the Lord.

Masongo responded:

So then you used terrorist methods in order to get the terrorism out of me? At that point, he said,

"Something happened to both of us, we were both crying, tears coming out slowly. ... My tears of pain were watering the new birth of reconciliation."

"Hospitality," Masongo said, is "one of the occupational hazards of being a Christian." To be a Good Samaritan means encountering strangers whom you don't like. One thing common about them is that they are created in the image and likeness of God.

Be they Afghans, Chileans, Americans or Africans, the image of God remains.

At the same conference, the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow said: "the key to hospitality and overcoming violence is acknowledging our 'connectedness' to others."

And Anna May Say Pa, a Burmese theologian exhorted the audience to "remember that we were all once strangers, so now it is our responsibility to open up our churches, our homes, in hospitality to all people – not just some Martha Stewart dinner party for our friends."

And as we may be saying to ourselves – I am not too sure about that – we need to hear again the words just read from Luke 14:12-14:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, ...

It has been written that these verses in Luke connect well to the call in Hebrews 13:2 – not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that “some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This mention of ‘strangers’ here in Hebrews probably refers to traveling Christians. Those to whom this letter was written were to make sure to open their homes when other Christians came through their village, town or city.

The practice of Christian hospitality has been a topic of much study and reflection in the past 10-15 years. Those involved in this have looked at documents from the early church to learn from our ancestors in the faith. Much of the focus has been on the writings of the abbots and priors, leaders of Christian monasteries, and the rules they established for monastic life.

In the book, *Spiritual Literacy*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat included the following words on hospitality:

Christian monasteries have a long-standing tradition of taking in strangers as if they were Christ. These places have an open-door policy toward those in need. They are heeding the advice in Hebrews 13:2: ‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

In one of his books, the late Brother Roger of the Taizé ecumenical monastic community in France wrote:

In each guest it is Christ himself whom we have to receive; so let us learn to be welcoming and be ready to offer our free time. Our hospitality should be generous and discerning.

I have been extended this kind of hospitality many times, though coming to mind is what happened during January term of my first year in seminary. For first year students, January term was to be a ‘shadow’ experience. That is, we were to be assigned to a church or Christian/service organization and ‘shadow’ or follow a staff person around to learn about his or her job and how he or she did it. I was assigned to a large church in Sacramento, CA and during my time there I ‘shadowed’ four of the pastors. The church had to arrange housing for my stay of three weeks with a family in the church. Blending one’s daily routines, quirks and idiosyncrasies with those of your hosts is an interesting part of one’s life journey. This family opened up their home to me. I was able to come and go as I needed to for the work I was doing.

Many of you have opened up your homes to members of touring choirs that have performed at Westminster; some of you have welcomed exchange students into your homes for longer periods of time. You have welcomed the stranger into your homes. And yet there was a safeness in doing this. You, I, that family in Sacramento were all expecting reasonable, good, responsible & considerate people to come through the door.

This is what churches and Presbyteries across this country expect, as well, as they minister to and with immigrants that come to their doors. In the *2007 Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study* we find the following about Northeast Georgia Presbytery:

New arrivals continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> C – from Senegal, Korea, Mexico, and Laos – from Argentina, Vietnam, El Salvador, and South Africa – and from Hungary, Denmark, China

and India. Newcomers were welcomed in worship by those who came before them. ... Demographic change in Northeast Georgia is significant, and many churches are extending Christian hospitality to newcomers.

We learn from the Mission Yearbook that in Presbyteries across this country have a "... vision of God's mission is offered to congregations that are called to honor God by extending hospitality to unfamiliar faces."

The issue of "safeness" was pushed for me in Indianapolis when late one spring a young man stopped by the church. He would be in Indianapolis for most of the summer working for a national company as door-to-door booksellers. He and two others needed a place to live for their time in Indy. The senior pastor brought them to talk with me – I had some extra bedrooms in my condo and they would be paying rent, which would mean extra money for me. A reference call was made and then it was agreed that they could stay at my home. They were hard workers and so were gone a great deal. But they still had to have keys to my home so they could come and go as they needed.

They remained there even when I went away on vacation for a couple of weeks and then when I was house-sitting for a church family for 3 weeks. I had to trust them with my home throughout the summer.

The issue of "safeness" also was pushed to varying degrees when displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina began to arrive in different parts of the country. Again, in the *2007 Mission Yearbook* we read:

When evacuees from hurricanes Rita and Katrina arrived in the Mission Union Presbytery, many churches and church members reached out to them with Christian care and compassion. First Church in Mexico employed an evacuee in its facility. Lake Church in Osage Beach welcomed several families and began a relationship with the congregation in New Orleans to which the families belonged.

The Presbytery of Florida in the panhandle of Florida:

...was struggling to recover from Hurricane Ivan in 2005. ... Disaster response plans were put into action in the fall of 2005 when Hurricane Katrina evacuees from Mississippi and Louisiana poured into Florida, seeking shelter in communities throughout the presbytery and beyond. The churches stood ready to help. In Tallahassee, near the presbytery's eastern edge, Faith Church and First Church coordinated a Family-to-Family initiative.

The pastor of Tallahassee First mentioned the father of one New Orleans family helped by the church who said, "We didn't know where else to go when we got here, so we came to the church and knocked on the door. We figured there must be someone here who could help."

Camp Alabama in the Presbytery of the Pines in Arkansas and Louisiana became

home for a number of displaced victims of Katrina. ...the hurricane evacuees were given comfortable shelter, and their basic needs were met. The needs of their unexpected guests were almost overwhelming, and the Pines faith community was a blessing to them. They too were a blessing to the people of the presbytery, by expanding their horizons and

giving them the opportunity to see Christ in the faces of these strangers whose lives had been devastated.

People in need at your doorstep and you know nothing of their values, reliability and trustworthiness.

We are dealing with the increasing suspicion of the stranger and foreigner in our society. We have to teach our children to be wary of people they do not know. And yet our summons to Christian hospitality calls us to welcome the stranger in our midst. We are called to welcome Jesus the Christ in the stranger. As Christians we believe that God is the host in God's realm. Who can repay God for God's hospitality extended to us? We, then, are to extend our hospitality, even, or maybe even more especially, to those who cannot repay us.

Lynda McDaniel reminds us in an article she wrote in 2000:

We too can treat one another as though Christ is in our midst. We do that every time we say thank you for honest effort (both at home and work), when we return phone calls, learn the names of support staff, extend and acknowledge courtesies in traffic, and respect sales clerks.

Hospitality is treating the other with respect.

It is not a flurry of sentimental acts or occasional gestures. It is a sustained commitment to the belief that the way we treat one another day by day matters deeply.

Hospitality is one of those things that has to be constantly practiced.... It is an act of the recklessly generous heart.

The tradition of Christian hospitality from its beginning has said that when you receive the stranger, you receive Christ. Paul Wilkes wrote in *Beyond the Walls: Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life*:

When you walk into McDonald's, and you're greeted by somebody who has an alert look on his face, and says, 'Good morning, can I help you?' – there's a connection with the divine right there. We all have that opportunity in everything we do. We can do it anytime – whether we're collecting garbage or surfing the Internet or serving as the CEO of a huge conglomerate. God's hand is always extended. We just need to reach for it.

We have not talked about this for a long, long time. I do not really know what motivated her to so act the first time and then to continue to do so, or for how long she did this, or how many came to the door.

From correspondence I have seen between her and her mother, I know now that at the time the family financial situation was not always the best. But one day when we were living in Joliet a hobo knocked on the backdoor of our home and asked for something to eat. Well, my mother fed him, and then the next and the next. Our home was marked, so that all those who came after would know this was a friendly place and food would be given. I want to believe that my mother acted because she saw the Christ in each of these strangers who came to the door and extended God's welcoming hand to the one in need.