***“Practicing Hospitality”***

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

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One of the best films of the 1980’s is called *"Places in the Heart*."  You may not remember this 1984 film, but you may remember a well-known incident associated with it.

You see, in 1985, *"Places in the Heart"* star Sally Field won her second Academy Award for her role in this film, where she famously said in her acceptance speech: *“I can’t deny the fact that you like me. Right now, you like me.”*

Set in Texas during the 1930s, it is a film about survival in the face of very difficult circumstances. Sally Field plays a poor widow with small children. She takes in boarders to help her make ends meet on her dirt-poor farm. Her two borders are a blind man, played by John Malkovich, and an African-American man, played by Danny Glover. Glover is also her farm hand and farm manager and faces overt racism from Field's white racist neighbors.

*"Places in the Heart"* is a story of triumph in the face of overwhelming odds. Sally Field well deserved the Oscar she won for her role in this film.

*"Places in the Heart"* is *also* one of the most *theological* Hollywood films ever made. It has the most amazing final scene, set in church, during Holy Communion. As Communion is being distributed, the camera pans the congregation. There pictured all around Sally Field's character are all the people who are and have been important in her life, those both living and dead. It is a portrait of the heavenly banquet, the communion of saints, if ever there was one.

And this ties in beautifully with today's gospel reading from Luke, in which Jesus is describing God's heavenly banquet, one which will include *everyone,* not just the wealthy, friends, and relatives, but also the poor, the disabled, and the blind.

In fact, this story is typical of Luke's Gospel. Luke often pictures Jesus eating and drinking. Luke's Jesus *also* (*always)* has a very open table for his dining. *Welcome* at Jesus' table is for *everyone,* rich and poor, men and women, all ages, races, ethnicities, religions—all manner of people who were living on the margins of society.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To be honest, the description of the dinner party in Luke 14 may make us glad to have missed it. It could not have been very pleasant for anyone; tension is thick and almost everyone seems to be worried about the impression he or she is making. The religious leaders are watching Jesus and Jesus is observing the behavior of both host and guests.

It starts out awkwardly for the host when Jesus chooses to heal a sick person on the Sabbath. Bad timing. Then Jesus challenges the ordinary behavior of the guests, who are scrambling for a better place around the table. In the form of a story, Jesus reminds the guests of the wisdom from Proverbs about allowing the host to invite them to an honored place rather than choosing the best seat for themselves. His teaching, seemingly about table manners, is actually about the values of the *Kingdom.*

Then Jesus addresses the host and conventional understandings of hospitality. Don’t worry about your status and benefit when you welcome people, he says. Overcome your concerns about reinforcing useful or reciprocal relationships. Do something really different, Jesus suggests. Invite to your parties the people who seem to bring little with them. The blessing, recognition and benefit you are worried about will come, though not through the means you expected. They will come in a way that makes sense only if you see the bigger picture.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is interesting because according to (the late) Jonathan Sacks, (the former) chief rabbi of Great Britain, the Hebrew Bible contains only one commandment to love the neighbor but no less than *36 commands* to love the stranger. Throughout Torah, the reason given for this moral teaching is that the Israelites themselves were strangers once. *“You shall not oppress a stranger,”* reads the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of Exodus 23:9, *“for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”*

Empathy is key, in other words. Those who have been lost in faraway places where they could not read the street signs, who have endured the stares of children as they walked through a strange town, who have held out a handful of foreign coins to a merchant without the slightest idea how many it takes to buy a loaf of bread—these are the people who know best how strangers feel, and who are therefore bound to use that knowledge by welcoming aliens instead of deepening their alienation.

In Christian tradition, these commands are honored in the practice of hospitality. *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,”* directs the letter to the Hebrews, *“for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”* This shifts the stimulus from human empathy to angelic ambition, but thanks to this saying and others straight from the lips of Jesus, Christians have long placed high value on showing kindness to the strangers with whom Jesus himself identified.[[3]](#footnote-3)

For example, (the late) Letty Russell, longtime professor at Yale Divinity School posthumously published a wonderful book (with the help of some of her Yale colleagues), titled: *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference.*

For Russell, hospitality is central to the mission of the church. It is above all a work of *justice-making,* expressing love across human differences that have long been sources of injustice and oppression.

Always something of a misfit in both American society and her church, Russell began serving as a pastor in 1951 and was one of the first women ordained in the United Presbyterian Church (in 1958). In her later years she was excluded from a pastorate because she was a lesbian. In reaching out to empower women leaders of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the Doctor of Ministry program she created for them at San Francisco Theological Seminary, she was always aware of her own privilege as a white American theology professor. She sought to use her power to empower other women without patronizing or demeaning them. Just hospitality requires growing self-knowledge as well as communication with the other to create communities of mutual flourishing.

Hospitality, then, for Russell, is *God’s welcome* to us *all* in our differences. We seek to embody God’s welcome even as we discover God’s presence *in the others* who receive our welcome. (Again) in receiving the stranger, we have *“entertained angels without knowing it”* (Heb. 13:2). In reaching out to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, we meet Christ in them. In her final book, compiled by friends, Letty Russell gives us a precious summation of her own life as one who sought to welcome the stranger and make the church a truly healing community.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is important to understand because Jesus' message, as well as his life, death, and resurrection, have shaped Christian understandings of hospitality. For instance, in Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus tells a story in response to his disciples' question about recognizing signs of the end of the age (Matt. 24:3). He describes a scene of final judgment in which the sheep and the goats are separated on the basis of whether or not they had welcomed, fed, and clothed the Son of Man*. "I was hungry, and you gave me food . . . a stranger and you welcomed me,"* explains Jesus*. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."* This passage is central to almost every teaching and tradition related to hospitality because it so closely links care for those in need with care for the Son of Man himself. Our response to the *"least"* is tied to our response to Jesus and to his response to us.

In other words, Jesus calls for *a practice* that was as countercultural then as it is today. On the basis of this passage (and others like Luke 14), the ancient church was convinced that Christians had to open their doors to poor people and to strangers.

In recent decades, attention to hospitality has increased, and its theological and human importance has again been recognized. *Christian communities* have formed around offering welcome to strangers. The Catholic Worker movement recovered the moral and practical significance of hospitality in the 1930s. L'Arche communities, founded by (the late) Jean Vanier, create a life in community with people with severe disabilities. Other communities welcome homeless people, students and seekers, street children and refugees.

The central importance of hospitality is also being recovered in *congregations.* We see fresh expressions of welcome when congregations make a place for children, international students, and isolated older people. Congre­gations are building bridges to their larger communities as they offer weekly neighborhood meals and find opportunities to come alongside troubled families.

But here, perhaps, is the most important point:

The practice is important *not only* for strangers and other vulnerable persons; *it is also crucial for the life of a congregation itself.* Hospitality is a means of grace for hosts as well as guests. Many people, after practicing hospitality, comment that they *"got so much more than they gave"* in welcoming a refugee family or in caring for a sick neighbor.

Often the best gift we can give another person is our time and attention. People come to life when they and their offerings are valued. This means that communities and the folks within them must be willing to receive. Only as we recognize our own vulnerabilities and incompleteness are we open to what others can contribute.

Friends, when we offer *welcome* or live with *gratitude*, when we make and *keep promises* or live *truthfully,* we are responding to the practices of God. Our experiences of *community* grow out of the practices through which we echo the *goodness, grace, and truth* we find in Jesus. We are not called to create ideal families, communities, or congregations. Building faithful communities of truth and hospitality, however, is at the heart of our grateful response to the one who *"became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Let us pray.

O God, help us to be welcoming people. Help us to welcome all people at your table. Help us to understand that your table, your table of grace and love is open and welcoming to everyone--those a lot like us and those who are very different than us are all welcome at your table. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

1. The Rev. Eric C. Shafer, *How Open is Your Table?* Day 1, August 29, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christine Pohl, *Risky Business: Sunday September 2,* The Christian Century, August 15, 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Guest Appearance: the Grace in Being the Stranger,* The Christian Century, September 20, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference,* The Christian Century, August 10, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Christine Pohl, *Our Life Together: Four Practices of Healthy Congregations,* The Christian Century, February 22, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)