

“What is Hospitality – Exactly?”

CPUC

Luke 4: 21-32

One purpose of this transition/interim time is providing a space for you to slow down a little and think about the next direction for this beloved church.

**And to push** you a little to ask hard questions – like what is our mission/purpose today not last year or 35 years ago – but now? How did this church get here in the first place? Why emphasize social justice and why is do we have Sunday school for children?

If this congregation did not exist, would the community miss you?

I hope I can give you a different set of lenses to look at yourself as individuals and church and ask- how is it going? So when there are changes around here – I will try to explain or warn you. But please know - it is never meant to hurt you – **disturb you maybe**. I keep learning that is usually when the messages from God are most important.

**So the new lens today is hospitality.** Your bulletin reads - everyone is invited here. What does that mean exactly? What does it mean to truly welcome others into this church community? In the south, we talk a lot about southern hospitality - that is genteel and pleasant.

In Minnesota we are Minnesota nice – and we pride ourselves for being nice. True hospitality is more than simple.

Try this - the German word ***gastfreundschaft*** for hospitality means: **friendship for the guest**. And the Dutch use the word ***gastvrijheid*** that **means freedom of the guest**. You can see the difference.

**The meaning of hospitality** I want you think about today is more in line with the Dutch – and pushes against what we usually think of as southern or Minnesota nice. It goes like this: **“Hospitality** is the creation of free space – Holy space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. **And the purpose is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.** Real hospitality is not telling people who or how to be so they fit in our household. Instead real hospitality is to offer a safe place so folks can find their place and share their own gifts.

**Hospitality** is not making our God and our way the goal - but giving others the opportunity to find God in their own way.

**Last Spring, I attended a clergy retreat in Atlanta – the purpose was to support and better equip pastors to lead churches. It happened at the closing exercises at the retreat. We came together in a large circle and we were asked to name someone who had been Christ for us – and offered Jesus’ hospitality.**

After we had time to think, several pastors shared very moving stories.

**One person shared a story** about a friend who had become like his father because his real dad had been an alcoholic and abusive. Others of us spoke about friends and counselors and even pastors who had sat with us when life seemed dark and soulless. Story after story was told about compassion, comfort, and rescue. **Before long the large conference room was church** - and we were feeling the warmth of each other's company. Jesus our friend was there with us and all was right with the world.

**And then a young woman said,** *“Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me -was, “Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?!”* No one said anything.

What became clear was that most of the time we try and **ignore the idea that Christ** not only comes into our lives to comfort and rescue us - but Christ also **is the one who challenges us and upsets us, and tells us the truth so clearly** that we will do all kinds of things to keep him out.

If you are not sure about that - then perhaps you have not recognized Christ in some of the most offensive people that God has sent your way – **I do not** think God sent all of them mind you – but some of them. You know those folks - **who come into our space and upset our equilibrium – just so we will** not confuse our own ideas with God's. What is **hospitality** exactly?

One thing, I do know is God or some other holiness makes us into community, not us. Otherwise I believe – churches would not exist. The truth is always more than any of us can grasp all by ourselves.

It is this whole tricky matter of **Hospitality – of who is welcome and who is not-** Jesus talked about all the time and eventually killed for it.

One time when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees, all the guests had their eyes on him, watching his every move.

<sup>7-9</sup> He went on to tell a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, he said, “When someone invites you to dinner, don’t take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he’ll come and call out in front of everybody, ‘You’re in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.’ Red-faced, you’ll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.

<sup>10-11</sup> “When you’re invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, ‘Friend, come up to the front.’ That will give the dinner guests something to talk about!

What I'm saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. *But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.*"

<sup>12-14</sup> Then he turned to the host. "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be—and experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."

And they watched Jesus carefully and finally he offended them so badly they decided to kill him. That is how mad we can get when someone suggests that God loves the people we won't sit next to – the people who disturb us and offend us, **and who belong to God just as surely as we do.**

The struggle is not that we are loved any less. The struggle is that people we can hardly tolerate are loved just as much as we are loved, **by a God - with an upsetting sense of Hospitality.**

Here is the Good News and that is - God offers the Hospitality and makes us into the church and a manifestation of God - and our differences are the way God opens us up to the truth that is bigger than we are.

Because the larger truth is bigger any one of us can grasp by ourselves.

Someone said once: We are called to be “The body of Christ and it is made up of many different members.” **Hospitality** is not making our God and our way the goal - **but giving others the opportunity to find God in their own way.**

The core of hospitality is the belief that the light of God is in everyone who walks into our life. Real hospitality takes courage, risk and a lot of faith to accept that those who trouble us the most - is God in our midst is doing something **that we have not considered yet**; we have just provided the holy space and the invitation.

*Henri Nouwen writes about Creating Space for Strangers by noting that the very world we live in is hostile. So many people are busy, lonely, estranged from friends, family, God. The world is so full of competition, aggression, fear, and suspicion. In this type of setting we as followers of Jesus have an obligation to “offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.”*

***When this happens, he writes, guests “reveal to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them.”***

What is the new lens? Try this - To be that place that intentionally is known as a place of hospitality. And that we might be known to those who visit us as a place that the stranger is truly welcome in our midst. And that we might be known as a holy space that provides freedom to figure out who you are and where you are going and what are the gifts that you have to offer the world.

**And we might be known to honor Hospitality - *as friendship to our guest as well as freedom to our guest.*** The hospitality here on Baker Street would be a place that does not imply you can belong here if you do it our way. Hospitality at CPUC would not strive to change people but give them the space where change can take place.

That same person said to another church in transition - we are called to be a place with a vision of holiness if you will. We are called to create and participate in what seems an impossible community that honors and respects all kinds of people without too much worry about our differences. We are called to acknowledge our intertwining and dependency on each other that says when “one person suffers we all suffer and when one person is honored we all rejoice”.

**Ok that is another sermon about the task of Churches in transition.**

**New lens – new day - what exactly is Hospitality at CPUC?**