

HOST AND GUEST: MOVING TO HIGHER GROUND

LUKE 10: 38-42

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I will never forget asking my mother when I was a small child what she would serve if President Eisenhower were coming to breakfast. I'm not sure why I was so interested in breakfast but it's always been one of my favorite meals of the day.

Her answer surprised me. She said she would probably prepare what we usually had – scrambled eggs, toast, orange juice – and, of course in those days, bacon. What would you serve it on? I asked. Our everyday china she said.

The President of the United States? I asked incredulously. Shouldn't he get something better than that? To which my mother said, Ike's a pretty regular guy... I don't think he'd like a big fuss. I think he'd appreciate being treated just like a member of the family.

That was one of my first lessons in hosting. Be yourself, be real. Don't make the other person uncomfortable if you can help it. Treat them like family. Make them feel at home.

Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary is a biblical lesson in hosting. The tradition of hospitality goes way back – well before Jesus to the early days when the Hebrew people were a nomadic tribe.

Maybe you remember how Abraham and Sarah opened their tent to three strangers who turned out to be three angels and blessed the old couple for their hospitality announcing Isaac would be born to Sarah in her old age.

Hospitality, welcoming the stranger, is one of the most important forms of practicing our faith. Our openness to one another is one of the defining features of Jesus' followers and conveys better than anything else the integrity of our faith.

Deuteronomy points to the reason why hospitality is so important: "remember that *you* were a stranger and a sojourner and God took you in."

It is worth noting Jesus and Paul built the early church on the principle of hospitality. Jesus sent his disciples out without purse or provisions telling them to rely on God's grace and the generosity of the neighbor; and Paul himself depended on the hospitality of people in every town he entered. If they do not receive you in that place, Jesus said, then depart from it and shake the dust from your sandals. Relying on hospitality is riskier than traveling with a Visa card. It means we have to trust God and others and let go of the illusion of independence and total self-sufficiency.

So when Martha and Mary invited Jesus to their house it was a risky thing to do. There was no precedent for women hosting men in this way, in the ancient world.

Hospitality requires exposure, opening the door into the inner sanctum of the home. What we risk is making more of ourselves available to the stranger.

That's the threat that lurks behind hospitality. Jesus enters into the home of Mary and Martha and not only talks with them and shares food at their table, but teaches them and even offers a little corrective advice.

I would go so far as to say that the core principle of our faith is hospitality. Our faith is based on our welcoming one another. The parable of the Good Samaritan shows us what it looks like to welcome someone who is basically different from us.

Jesus shows us what it looks like to welcome someone not of our own class or social standing. He shows us what it looks like to welcome the outcast, the destitute, the lowly. Jesus hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes for goodness' sake.

I remember when St. Peter's Lutheran Church sold its valuable real estate in mid-town Manhattan. The deal was that the new Citicorp building would be constructed on the site but there would also be a new church there as well. Henri Nouwen, whose quote appears on the cover of today's bulletin, was asked to consult. The leaders of the congregation wanted their church to be inviting, welcoming, hospitable. What they came up with was a plan that placed the sanctuary below street level. When you walk by the church on 55th and Lexington and look in the windows you actually see into the sanctuary below. It is a powerful symbol. God's people there beneath you. Visible. Exposed. Not high and lifted up.

Sometimes we get so caught up in all the machinery of the church that we become blind to how inaccessible we have become – and therefore out of touch with what I call the religion of Jesus. How difficult physically and socially and mentally we make it to enter into and participate in the life of a Christian community. It's not just about having enough parking space, accessible toilets and a friendly, welcoming greeter at the door.

Maybe you read about the push in Congress last week to pass an amendment to the constitution banning gay marriage. And when that failed the attempt by some Senators to "contain" gay marriage by not requiring non-supporting states to accept the gay marriages from states where they are sanctioned.

I have a hunch the real reason gay marriage and life style and ordaining gay and lesbian persons to ministry is rejected by some in our society is not biblical or theological grounds. The real reason for rejection is that such a life style is different and makes some people uncomfortable. It is easier to condemn what makes us uncomfortable than it is to consider where the discomfort comes from and how perhaps we need to change.

A colleague relays the story of a member of his congregation who wanted desperately to reconcile with his sister. So he and his partner just got in their car in North Carolina and drove to Maine where the sister lived.

This man thought that if his sister could only meet his partner and see how happy they were together and how much they cared for each other that everything would be different, everything would change.

When they arrived and knocked on the door and it opened he said, "Susan, this is Joel, and I wanted you to meet..." And she said, "This is a Christian home. I want you to get off my porch and out of my yard and leave us alone." Whether the issue is sexual orientation or race or class the church too often suffers from what Robert Bellah calls "the narcissism of similarity" limiting our congregations to people just like us.¹

What makes the narcissism of similarity so appealing? It is non-threatening. I don't have to think or do anything differently from the way I always have done it. Never mind if it is the right way to think or act. The narcissism of similarity is grounded in fear. Fear of change. Fear of "the other." The very kind of fear that John says, on the cover of the bulletin today, love casts out.

A church like Westminster has a special challenge. How do we reach out to invite others who aren't just like us to become a part of our life together? Certainly the leaders of the church have to exhibit a special openness. But then folks in the pews have to open their lives to include and invite others in who may be of a different age or social background or whatever the category of difference is.

The goal for us is to constantly be enlarging our concept of this church family. It's why Jesus at the end of Matthew's gospel says that the great test of our fidelity to God is not our knowledge of the Bible, or our ability to recite the creed with conviction. The major test is this: I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

It's so easy to get these things backwards. So often worship is perceived as my coming to church to knock on God's door and say "hello, is there anyone here?"

But really it is the other way around. The door that needs opening is not the door of Jesus. It is the door into our lives, our hearts, our minds.

We are here today and maybe some of us are knocking on God's door. I know some of us do have concerns and problems we want to present to God for help and guidance. But it's a two way process. God is knocking on our door as well. Will we let him in?

Yesterday, several of us attended the Friendship Baptist Church picnic at JFK Park on Clinton St. From the moment of our arrival we were greeted warmly, asked if we would like anything to eat. Introduced to scores of people.

I had the feeling of being a special guest. Of being an honored guest. I felt surrounded quite literally by affection and caring.

Pastor Bill Wilson said to me, "you know our people work together during the week, but we worship separately, on different ends of town. It's up to us to move to higher ground. It is up to us to break down the barriers that Christ has already torn down but we have rebuilt. Think what a great city this could be if God's people could simply welcome one another.

In the last book of the bible, Revelation, the risen Christ says this: Behold I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me.

Isn't that the simple trust and intimacy we long for! Isn't that, finally, what we want from God and one another! Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, vol. 32, No. 3, Year C, July through September, 2004, 14.