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Classical Worship for Today:
Hospitality: Where Evangelism Begins



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*F*or want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the rider was lost, and for want of the rider the war was lost." Hospitality is the nail that often makes the difference in the battle to win people to Christ. Just as a war may hang on something as small as a nail, so in the great cause of reaching people with the gospel and bringing them into the Church, much can be lost over the absence of this one Christian virtue.

American Evangelicals can be grateful for the decades of blessing in reaching millions of people with the gospel of Christ. One of evangelicalism's greatest strengths has been the fusion of its passion to win people to Christ and its sensitivity to the culture of the people it is seeking to reach. Despite that, American evangelism has profoundly changed the Church in America. Our success in relating to the culture has been something of a mixed blessing for as the Church has engaged the culture, the culture for the most part has won. Today the Church's culture more closely resembles its surroundings than it resembles the heritage of the Church's past worship and spirituality. Modern evangelism has changed the Church, and in the view of many, that change has not been an improvement.

While the reasons for our openness to changing the wor-

ship and spiritual disciplines of the Church have deep theological roots, there is another more pragmatic question we need to face if we are to be faithful to the mandate of the Lord to make disciples of all the nations, including our own neighbors: if we are not going to change the life of the Church to conform to contemporary culture, how will we create bridges to people around us who do not know Christ?

The answer from the pages of Scripture and the history of the Church centers in a Christian virtue we need to understand and rediscover: hospitality. Hospitality is a forgotten virtue in part because we have lost the essence of its meaning. If we are going to restore hospitality to our communal consciousness we will need to recast the word in its biblical meaning. The word itself means "love of the stranger." Creating social situations with food and pleasant surroundings may be a part of hospitality, but love of the stranger does not necessarily require outstanding culinary and decorating strengths. We often speak of "the gift of hospitality" as though social and culinary skills enable some people to exercise this gift while those who don't possess this "gift" are exempt from needing to have hospitality mark their lives. We also tend to think of people who are extroverts as being suitable for showing hospitality while the introvert is given a pass from hospitality. This culturally conditioned change of meaning robs the Church of an important kingdom component of fulfilling God's call to bear witness to Christ and call people to discipleship in the Church.

The Old Testament culture of the love of the stranger was deeply rooted in the moral fabric of the community. The stranger was to be shown kindness, care and help. People were expected to pay attention to the stranger in town and take initiative to help him to be safe and provided for. In fact, the famous sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was as much a violation of caring for the stranger as it was the violation of sexual law (Ezekiel 16:49). In the New Testament hospitality was a foundational virtue for serving as a leader in the Church (1 Timothy 3:2). Clearly, hospitality is a moral virtue rather than a gift. Otherwise, many would be excluded from eldership on

the basis of gifting rather than spiritual maturity. Within the context of different personalities, temperaments and gifts, hospitality is a virtue that church leaders need to possess, exercise and model to the entire Christian community.

Love of the stranger, then, is a moral quality that looks for people who are presently outside the circle. How often even in church gatherings we tend to gravitate toward people we know and are comfortable with and leave the stranger to stand alone to fend for herself. Hospitality takes initiative to remove the barrier of strangeness. It draws people who are apart from us into our lives and our service. Asbury Seminary professor, Christine Pohl, in her book, *Making Room*, asserts that hospitality was largely lost in the eighteenth century. Strangers were still cared for, but that care was institutionalized into hotels, restaurants and hospitals and usually provided as a business for those who could pay. Hospitality became a matter of luxury and indulgence and rarely was extended to people beyond the circle of family and friendship. The explanation is often given that times have changed and hospitality is no longer needed as it once was, but it is probably closer to the truth to admit that we have arranged our lives so we no longer need to encounter strangers, and therefore have little need or opportunity to love them. Whether the stranger's need is food and lodging, medical attention or the bond of belonging in a community, we have increasingly created cultural, commercial and media walls of insulation. Social hospitality is often replaced by electronic friends who come into our lives on television, never overstay their welcome and are in our company only as long as they provide us with pleasure and stimulation. Their demand on us is no greater than the cable and electric bill. We hardly have place in our lives for real people with all their inconvenient needs and requirements.

Of course, this pattern of hospitality requires something from us. Love of the stranger is not merely a pleasant attitude we simply put on our long list of things to be and things to do. Hospitality for most of us requires a deep and powerful change in our motivation and priorities. This unselfish energy

comes by entering into the story of God's redeeming love and seeing that we are part of the people of God who were loved by God when we were strangers. In Exodus 23:9 the Lord speaks to his people and says, "You shall not oppress a sojourner (*a person who doesn't have a place or has a need he cannot meet himself*). You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (emphasis mine). God's salvation was to people who needed hospitality and the Lord gave his people a home after their years of need. That is the picture of salvation, the homeless heart finding its home in God. If we have experienced the grace of God, we know both the heart of the sojourner and the joy of receiving God's hospitality. God expects us to remember what it was like before we found our home in him.

Perhaps our trouble in continually showing love for the stranger, who has no home in the family of God's people, is that we simply have forgotten what it is like to need hospitality. The heart of a sojourner has a deep determination never to forget. The heart of a sojourner has a willingness to know the emptiness of the core of the soul who is without Christ. We reflect on it. We humbly look for signs of the need in people we know. We pray that God will grant us wisdom, compassion and courage to step across the threshold of our own interests to relate to people without Christ in the spirit of humility, respect and service. We remember that the grace that has flowed from God's heart to ours is a river that flows beyond us. If the river stops in us, we become a Dead Sea.

The heart of the sojourner knows that half measures will are not enough. Half measures wear different faces. Some "seeker indifferent" churches embrace the half measures of high worship, rigorous doctrine and demanding spiritual formation and leave the door open for any who are desperate enough to brave the great obstacle between their lives and the high tower of their church. The "seeker sensitive" churches embrace immediate accessibility and, as a result, remove so much from the worship life and the spiritual formation of the church. The easy access that is created is often neutralized by the shallow provision offered inside. Bringing outsiders into

the Church is not a ministry for the half-hearted who are willing to settle for half measures.

I have a friend who knows the importance of remembering what it was like to be outside and what it takes to bring people in. He grew up in a broken family and had no money to go to college. Far away, there was another family who had just one son. This father and mother carefully planned for their son's future and by the time he graduated from high school they had saved enough for his entire college education. War came and their son was killed in action. The broken-hearted parents thought of their son's college fund and decided to find a young man who could not afford to go to college. My friend was the person they chose and they provided him with everything he needed for his education. After he graduated he became a successful businessman and has given great effort to provide funds for college educations for many young people around the world. Why? Because he never forgot. He knows the heart of the sojourner.

We who are by grace the Church of Jesus Christ must never forget either where we have come from or who we are now. We were "lost, but now are found, were blind but now we see." We hold on to the memory of life on the outside and because of God's mercy to us, we open our hearts to those still outside God's house.

There is the reward of divine encounter in hospitality. Hebrews 13:2 reminds us that when we find the stranger—the person who has no particular prospect of being anything of advantage to us—and we initiate acts of love toward him we may bring the very presence of God into our lives. Hebrews 13:2 says of such hospitable people that they have "entertained angels unawares." This phrase recalls the story of Abraham in Genesis 18. It was the hottest time of the day. Everyone who could was resting out of the glare of the sun and had found refuge in the comfort and shade of his tent. Three men came to Abraham's door and stood before him. Abraham gave up his rest and the comfort of his quiet solitude and invited them into his home and offered them his food, refreshment and shelter. He loved these men who were

strangers to him and took the initiatives necessary to welcome them as guests into his home. Of course Abraham had no idea that these were far more than mere men but were the very angels of God. Jesus says that when we find the stranger, the sojourner, the person who needs welcome, we never know who it is we are loving. Jesus says that when we care for those who hunger for bread, or for the bread of life, who need clothes, or who need the clothing of dignity and respect, who need the refreshment of a cup of cold water or the water of life, when we care for people like that we are caring for Jesus himself. While this kind of hospitality may often be demanding, tiring and frustrating, it creates the path for the Spirit of God to share deeply with the humanity of another person and Christ may enter in. When hospitality has this result, our hearts sing with the confidence that this is the reason God has kept us here in this world.

American Christianity is spending millions, perhaps billions, of dollars every year to get attention and not to bore people with our message. Much of our evangelism seems to be trying to reach people who have no apparent sense of spiritual need or desire. In order to gain their attention we have sought to appeal to their own interests. Usually in America this will be through a form of religiously-oriented entertainment. Great effort and large sums of money are spent to create events that will favorably impress the unchurched and the unconcerned. In the process the Church's own culture and vision has been profoundly changed and the great wealth of the Christian Tradition has been largely lost. Pragmatic shortcuts often seem to be an attempt to take shortcuts that avoid the demanding call to love strangers by offering ourselves to them as they are and learning about their interests, their dreams and their needs as real people. It was a shortcut the Lord never took.

Jesus Christ had a heart for the stranger. He had a special sensitivity to those who were alone, who needed help, who needed a friend. When the man we know as the rich young ruler was saddened by the cost of following Christ, he walked away from the Friend who loved him. As we have the courage

to trust the Father of our Lord Jesus to place our initiatives of friendship in his hands we become vessels of the love of God that the Spirit will use to touch the hearts of people who seem to need nothing and whose pursuits and pleasures have little to do with knowing God. Our hustling society leaves many people alone in the quiet moments. Loving a stranger is one of God's chief ways for his people to go beyond ourselves and our Christian circle to find and bring the lost sheep home.

The battle to win lost people is daunting to many Christians and to the Church. We hold seminars on witnessing. We produce special evangelism events. We even pray for the lost. Maybe, just maybe, if we looked for the little nail of hospitality to grow in our lives a new day might dawn where strangers to God become friends because we simply took the risk to love them and extend ourselves to them. Could it be that simple?

Author

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