

TRUE HOSPITALITY  
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
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“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Mt. 10:40). These can be uncomfortable words, if we truly consider their meaning. Most of us are very comfortable with the idea of offering hospitality. But here, Jesus is telling us – and it is us, because he is addressing his disciples – that we are worthy to be extended the same hospitality that is due to him. Jesus’ words challenge us to embrace the idea that while it may be better to give than to receive, it is important that we be comfortable receiving, too.

This happens to be something that was a growth edge for me in my life, up until quite recently, in fact. Can you identify with feeling uncomfortable receiving? Being praised, being thanked, being recognized? Being the recipient of hospitality? I expect that many of you can identify. Many of us were brought up thinking that it was somehow bad form to enjoy being given to; our job was to give and to expect nothing in return.

There is something deeper than this, though. If one grew up, as I did, as a member of the dominant culture, or the majority culture, and especially as a man in this culture, being able to give freely often reflected power and privilege. I was in a position to give and to feel good about giving. It’s subtle – and it certainly isn’t the whole story – but to be in a position to extend hospitality is also usually to be in a position to choose not to, if one wishes. Being the recipient is a weaker position: it requires a kind of vulnerability to the generosity of the other. If we avoid putting ourselves in this weaker position, we keep the power of being the giver to ourselves; and we get to pick who receives our hospitality.

I think that this is exactly what Jesus was instructing his disciples to be careful about. He wants them – and us – to embrace being in the vulnerable position of receiving. Otherwise, he knows, we run the risk of running a club with a limited membership: only some will be welcome. This is completely opposite to the core value system of the Gospel.

But it takes a lot to learn it. When I was a new young Associate Pastor serving a large suburban Connecticut church, I led a youth trip to Appalachia one summer through the Appalachia Service Project. We were a group of about thirty, charged with renovating a tiny house deep in a Virginia “holler.” I will never forget the bleak living conditions in that remote community, and the rough state of the house we worked on. I remember the young Vietnamese woman who lived there, a war bride whose husband had since abandoned her, and her young son. I remember the tiny, nearly empty refrigerator, and the bare cupboards.

Over the course of a week, we transformed the place. It felt wonderful to do so, and to see the pleasure of the family as their home became so much more pleasant and comfortable. All of us – the kids in the youth group and the group of very young adults who led them – enjoyed being in the position to offer our help. We were glad to help and felt good about ourselves – this was what we had been taught to do.

Then came our last day on the job. The evening before, as we were leaving, our Vietnamese hostess had said not to bring our lunches the next day: she would have food for us. We couldn’t imagine how she would be able to feed all of us – by all appearances she didn’t have enough food for herself and her son.

We arrived, and as soon as we got out of our cars, we smelled the delicious meal that was waiting for us up on the porch of that tiny house. A huge pan of pork barbecue – baked beans – corn bread – green salad. Plus tableware for all of us. Enough food for each of us to have a huge plate of food, and seconds if we wanted.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the meal was a miraculous one. We adults wondered if our hostess had gone without food all week – or maybe longer – so that she could provide that meal for us. However it happened, it was simply unforgettable, and powerfully moving. We were no longer the wealthy Connecticut doers of good works (as fine a thing as that was). We were the recipients of an abundant, and truly sacrificial, hospitality. We had been welcomed as Christ.

It changed all of us in the group. It broke our hearts open. We saw that deep hospitality involves a deep mutuality of giving and receiving. We saw the power of receiving, and learned that the people who knew more about

generosity were our hostess and her son, not us. We were the learners. As you can imagine, it was far from entirely comfortable.

But only embracing the discomfort of knowing that we have a lot to learn allows us to extend true, Christlike hospitality. Today is June 28. On this day in 1969, the Stonewall riots took place in Greenwich Village. This marked the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. One year later – fifty years ago – the first Gay Pride parade took place. Churches were not welcoming places for the LGBTQ community in those days. In their position as powerful community institutions, they modeled hospitality and generosity – selectively.

Today, thanks be to God, we in the church have learned a lot. The process is by no means complete. But Christ's welcome is extended much more fully and widely in the church today than it was fifty years ago. The incredible ministries and leadership of the LGBTQ brothers and sisters who now share in our common life, from which we have received so much, have broken the narrow prejudices that prevailed for so long, and so tragically, in the church. It is for us to remember that it is in continuing to receive, to learn, to be the vulnerable ones, that our own capacity to welcome will continue to grow, until it approaches the full welcome that is Christ's own.