

RCL YearA, Proper 8, June 29th, 2008
 Jeremiah 28:5-9; Romans 6:12-23; St. Matthew 10:40-42
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church
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In the 18th century Samuel Johnson observed that: ***“In a commercial country, a busy country, time becomes precious, and therefore hospitality is not so much valued. No doubt there is still room for a certain degree of it; and a man has a satisfaction in seeing his friends eating and drinking around him. But promiscuous hospitality is not the way to gain real influence.”***

Johnson may or may not have understood that he was articulating a key challenge to the Christian understanding of life. Hospitality was central to the message of Jesus, and a new community expressing God's own hospitality was at the core of His teaching. The early Church understood this, initially sharing all things in common, and celebrating the Eucharist in the context of a meal taken together. Goods were redistributed according to need, and a heretofore unheard of egalitarianism prevailed.

The practices of hospitality were understood as key components of the credibility of the gospel. Christians were known for their adoption of infants left to die by exposure, for their care of the poor, and of widows, who, in the context of that time and place, had little social standing. Over time, Christians began to establish institutions to care for pilgrims and for the poor, supplementing home and church-based hospitality. Monastic communities became key carriers of hospitality through the Middle Ages, as monastics tended to the physical, social and spiritual needs of strangers, offering food, shelter, welcome and dignity transcending ethnic, tribal, and national distinctions. Christians founded hospitals and orphanages and engaged in prison reform because of their belief in deep hospitality.

From my perspective as a parish priest, Johnson's observation remains in the 21st century a key challenge to the development of vital Christian community. We are all so busy that we don't make time to cultivate habits of faith and fellowship together. That is the way life is in commercial countries, and certainly in greater Los Angeles. As we lean against the pressures which form and shape a culture such as our own, it might help to better understand just how central community was to Jesus, and to strive ourselves to make room for genuine community in our household of Faith.

Americans tend to view community, in good Lockean style, as an aggregate of individuals. We fail to perceive the degree to which even our sense of individuality is rooted in the cultures in which we are embedded. Josiah Royce was more accurate when he said: ***“Man, the social being, naturally and in a sense helplessly, depends on his communities. Severed from them, he has neither worth nor wit, but wanders in waste places, and when he returns finds the lonely house of his individual life empty, swept and isolated.”***

But not any community would do for Jesus. He separated Himself from the patriarchal family model of His day both by His celibacy, and His teaching. When His family came to Him one day, He refused to see them, saying: ***“whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, that one is my brother and sister and mother”*** (Matthew 13:15). In the washing of the reluctant disciple's feet He set an example of mutuality based on shared commitment to God rather than the rules of property and inheritance. In calling

His disciples he deliberately created a community of friends and supporters with sharply different temperaments and points of view. Under ordinary circumstances, Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot wouldn't have been caught dead together.

It is against this backdrop that we hear the words of today's Gospel: ***“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me”*** (Matthew 10:40). I don't often quibble with the English translation of the New Revised Standard Version, an excellent translation of the Greek Bible, but today I do. Jesus does not say “Whoever *welcomes* me...” the Greek word He uses is *dexomenos*, *receives*. *Dexomenos* was used to describe the respectful acceptance of an ambassador. It meant to “receive” the king's representative. Those who receive Jesus' disciples in this manner receive Jesus, and receive God the Father. The call to hospitality is a call to discipleship, and “welcome” isn't a word strong enough to bear that weight. We are to be received in the Name of Christ, and we are to receive others in that Name.

But which others?

One of the things the death of our father has accomplished for my sister and I is a surfacing and articulation of the values he imparted to us, as is, I expect, true in many families at the death of a loved one. While recently in Ohio we found ourselves talking about the hospitality which characterized our larger family growing up. Wandering into a gathering of Woodward's pretty much meant forced incorporation into whatever event was underway. My father had had good models in his own parents, who seemed often to have someone living with them from Cuba or Nicaragua or some distant place where they were involved. It was open door, open hearth, all the time. “Come in, the beer is warm and the fire lovely,” my Grandmother would say, quoting her own Welsh mother.

That isn't a bad model for church. “Come on in. Everybody's welcome. No litmus tests apply.” It breeds tolerance and a certain elasticity of mind to have table fellowship with characters as diverse as Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector, and such diversity is a strength, not a weakness, for any congregation. Too much homogeneity is not, on the whole, a good thing for a Christian.

Unless our own congregations are pushing us in expansive directions, how can we enter into the full implications of Jesus' teaching about the poor. In Matthew 25 Jesus refers to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and sick and imprisoned as members of His own family. His rejection of patriarchy and tribalism for something much greater was complete. As we treat these members of Christ's family, so we will have treated Him, and our place in the Kingdom of God determined accordingly.

I hear in today's Gospel lesson a challenge to those of us formed by a commercial culture wherein time is precious, and hospitality not valued. We are challenged, I think, to press back against that culture, becoming intentional not merely about welcoming the stranger, and welcoming one another, but in learning what it means to *receive* all that another person is in the Name of Christ, daring bonds of community not based on shared interests and commonalities, but on membership in the large, expansive, and non-traditional family of Jesus. Promiscuous hospitality may not be the way to gain influence, but it will win us the friendship and approval of God. Amen. GFW+