

Oh Jesus, Is It You...again?

On Holy Hospitality

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Some years ago, when I lived in Concord, MA, I was riding my bike past the neighborhood soccer field as two adolescent teams finished up a match. After the final whistle, the girls huddled to raise their voices in cheer. Admittedly, it was windy and I was just beginning to realize I needed hearing aids...so, I could have sworn I heard: "We are the Lepers and no one could be prouder and if you want to hear it we'll yell a little louder." Excuse me! Did they say "We are the Lepers?" Maybe it was just the wind playing tricks or the bike helmet or whatever. It turns out the team was called the "Leopards." Close, but....as they say, no cigar.

Even so, the misconstrued "Leper" cheer is as good a starting point as any for my reflections about holy hospitality – the fundamental spiritual practice of flinging wide the doors of our congregations and our hearts to welcome the stranger, harbor the wanderer, and embrace the other in his or her otherness. This has been harder with the physical limitations of the pandemic, but the ethos is there always, regardless.

When you consider this ideal of hospitality, what could be more "other" to our relatively healthy and charmed lives than a leper? And, with whom would it be harder to share one's row in the Sanctuary or guest bed or dinner table? That's where the ministry, the theology of hospitality enters in. The 13th century mystic Mecktilde of Madgeberg asked: How shall we live? Her answer: "Welcoming to all." Think about Albert Schweitzer's African leper colonies (speaking of lepers) – how the 350 beds were always filled and nobody was ever turned away. His radical hospitality made him a legend and curiosity.

Schweitzer understood that Hospitality is an ancient religious imperative, not merely etiquette. The Greek term for hospitality, "philoxenia," means literally "lover of strangers," and in Greek versions of the Bible, the term most commonly associated with hospitality is xenos, translated as many things -- host, guest, foreigner, stranger, and even enemy.

One can extrapolate from this that Jesus' admonition to "love your enemies" was actually a command to practice hospitality. Consider the Christmas story itself. Jesus begins life as a perfect stranger, seeking shelter. There is "no room at the Inn" (among humans), so he finds it in a manger, nestled in straw and surrounded by animals.

The name we give Jesus at this time of year is Emmanuel which means “God with Us.” Advent means “coming.” I’d say one of the core messages in the timeless Nativity tale is that our species needs to more fully embody deep hospitality in our personal, spiritual, and communal lives. We need to make room at the Inn and receive into our open arms, the holy that wishes to be born and sheltered.

Naturally, since there are no coincidences in Scripture, the ministry conducted by Jesus in the Galilee, some 30 years later, resonates with lessons about practicing hospitality to strangers. We also get a glimpse of the rewards or punishments awaiting those in the hereafter, whose behavior is either welcoming or hostile. Jesus explained that come Judgment Day, he’d recognize his flock, based on these criteria: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” He tells us that **he** is the stranger at the door. “I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

The spirit seems to move in the lives of Biblical characters who open the door or “keep their lamps trimmed and burning” for each stranger. In his book, The Wounded Healer, the Catholic writer Henri Nouwen relates this phenomenon to our modern lives. Nouwen tells us that hospitality is a form of *healing* – a balm in the wilderness – and when we open our lives to others, when we extend safe haven or friendly conversation, when we share food or other resources, we not only extend a form of grace to them, but we also receive a blessing in return. It’s a form of sacred quid pro quo.

Like the Magi, strangers often carry precious gifts, and when they are received with hospitality, patience, openness, and love, they often open up and reveal those gifts to us. How can I not be reminded here of the characters in two stories I’ve told here before - Giltha the eccentric but generous Goat Lady with her bells and candlelight or the slightly confused Vietnamese Boy, trick-or-treating joyfully during Advent -both carrying precious and unexpected gifts that create connection and compassion.

Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus, the man and teacher, is the most hospitable of people, mingling with the rich and the poor, Jew and Gentile, lowly Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, and even, women. He continually opens his arms and crosses taboo boundaries in the name of compassion and acceptance. We can learn much from his wholly human example. And because the human Jesus (the one UUs admire) typifies the stranger (as both host and guest) throughout his ministry, Christian monasteries, to this day, have a long-standing tradition of taking in strangers as if they were each Jesus himself.

On a global level, this means joining efforts towards immigration justice (UUJAZ has such a working group and our national UU Service Committee often focuses its work on refugees), or doing what we can to protest the treatment of displaced persons in places like Belarus, Syria, and on our Southern border. We are so very lucky to be warm and dry, and well fed and not displaced. Can we see the weary father carrying his child on his shoulders through a Polish forest as Jesus, as a welcoming guest?

The writer Kathleen Norris remembers the 6th century monk Saint Benedict and his dictum for those in his order that the monastery never be without guests. Over the years, says Norris, “monks have been quick to recognize that such hospitality, while undoubtedly a blessing can also create burdens for them. As an older monk explained to a younger one: “I have finally learned to accept people as they are Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes, when I’m tired and weary of guests and I see a stranger coming up the road, I say to myself, “Oh, Jesus...is it *you*, again?”

Think about your own lives, and how there seems to be little time for those we already know and love. Perhaps, the last thing you want to hear from me, especially during this hectic season is that you should seek out strangers and welcome them as if they were Jesus, babe, man, or metaphor. But that’s just what I’m asking you to do.

We did just that Friday night at a wonderful warm and fun Newcomer happy hour at the Clark’s house. We shared times we were welcomed. Think about a time when the doors opened and you were welcomed – here, or at school or summer camp or a town choir or a hiking group. It makes you feel human, visible and known.

Welcoming each stranger as a holy babe, all grown up, requires some sacrifice as well as a leap of faith to engage with those we may not have chosen as friends or even, acquaintances. On this Advent morning, we do well to ask ourselves: Who is knocking at *our* Sanctuary doors? We take pride in being “intentionally- welcoming” and you are all welcome here, no matter who you are or who you love. Yet, we must continue to make room and create space for holy hospitality to occur, even if we feel full up. I was looking at the brochures in our lobby and was struck by how many of them had the word “home” or “hospitality” or “belonging” on the cover- it is a religious imperative for us religious liberals, too.

We’ve come a long way here at Beacon, since well before my tenure, towards living out this mission, through the Welcoming Congregation program and other heartfelt efforts. It has taken time and patience and setbacks and fortitude, and big hearts and busy hands and clear heads, all converging. If you are new to this congregation, please come back throughout this month, and after the New

Year and join us for services and our other programs. We are not tired and weary of guests and when we see you coming up the path, we will endeavor to say, "Oh, Jesus...is it *you* again?"

Sometimes, holy hospitality it's simply a matter of degrees. My colleague Carl Scovel tells of a Christmas season, some years ago, during which he attempted to economize by keeping the Sanctuary at the historic Kings Chapel in Boston a few degrees cooler. This ploy proved to be far from hospitable. He recalls discovering that a piece from the Nativity crèche was missing after the Christmas Eve service. Then he noticed that someone had placed a piece of paper under the figure of Mary. He drew it out and read the neatly penciled message: "We've got Jesus! Turn up the heat 8 degrees and we'll return him for the morning service."

Keeping the sanctuary warm and dry is only the beginning. At the UU church in Tampa, Florida, the order of service cover reads: "You are welcome through these doors as long as you do not close them behind you to another." I interpret this sentence to mean that we are not permitted to decide who will find a home in Unitarian Universalism. We are Innkeepers, not gatekeepers.

We want to share our liberal message of freedom, reason, and acceptance of one another on the journey. We open our doors to welcome seekers who resonate with our belief that humanity will save itself from a humanized hell; that we can engage with the other in spite of differences; and that we can decide for ourselves what is true and holy and profound.

An essential way to express our own gratitude for having found this Sanctuary and becoming known here is to share it graciously and pro-actively with others who knock on our door, thereby living up to our mission as an "intentionally-welcoming" congregation. Talk to someone you don't know at social hour. Join the efforts of the Congregational Vitality team to welcome and integrate newcomers to our beloved community.

My colleague, Davidson Loehr, shares the very personal and profound experience of unexpectedly finding himself cast as a stranger seeking shelter one Christmas season. He had decided to drive 500 miles from Austin, Texas to Clarinda, Iowa to visit his aging and ailing grandfather, whom he hadn't seen for nine years. He called Grandpa, who said it would be "just fine" to visit after Christmas, so Davidson set out on his own Christmas pilgrimage.

A few miles outside Clarinda, his aging Datsun failed and a lady at the nearest farmhouse wouldn't let him use the phone. Finally, her husband came down, a big, burly fellow, and said he could come in and make the call. but don't go walking into other rooms. Davidson got himself towed to a local garage where the mechanic quipped: "Nice car, Did you make it?"

By the time he got to his grandfather's, it was late, cold, dark and windy, with blowing snow. He knocked and, a few moment later, when this dear old man opened the door, Davidson became aware of two things simultaneously. He writes: "The first was that he had no idea who I was. He was quite senile. He didn't know me, although my last name rang a bell. I came to see my grandfather, and he opened the door to find a complete stranger, come from far away on a cold, dark, snowy night.

The second thing I noticed just as quickly was that, even while he had no idea who this strange young man on his porch was, he was opening his door as wide as he could and welcoming me inside." Davidson stayed for two days. During the lucid moments, they shared memories. But, Davidson had to introduce himself to Grandpa several times a day. He recalls: "Every time I would come out of one of his rooms and he would come out of another, he would be mildly shocked to find as stranger in his home and would say again, "Well, hello and welcome. And who may you be?"

Davidson can't help but liken himself to Mary and Joseph when he recalls this memorable, odd visit. "Every time there is room at an Inn," he tells us. "Every time we overcome fear with love, the stage is set for another kind of manger scene where something holy can be born. It happened to me, so I can testify to it."

Here, in this very room, and wherever else we are called to practice holy hospitality, we can open our doors, our minds, and our hearts; open our arms like a small sheltering tree in the forest, even –especially! – when we are weary or cranky, or when it is awkward or inconvenient; in the bleak midwinter *and* in the radiance of summer. We can make the pledge embodied in the moving anthem we heard from our choir – "I won't harm you with words from my mouth, I love you, I need you to survive."

May we lift our voices to exclaim like humble monks and forgetful grandfathers; unseasonable trick-or-treaters, harried Innkeepers, wind-whipped soccer girls, and quirky Goat Ladies aglow: "Well, hello, and welcome. And who may you be?" Then, after a moment, to enquire - wide-eyed and willing, " Oh, Jesus... is it *you*...again?" Blessed be. Blessed we,and Amen.

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