

Sermon for Sunday, July 2, 2017 - "Be a Guest"

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Be a Guest

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When I first read the Gospel for today, I thought it was about how we need to welcome others. Except, Jesus says to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me." Here he isn't instructing the disciples to show hospitality. He's telling them to receive it. Jesus is calling his disciples, including all of us, to be in situations where we will be dependent on the hospitality of others.

Why?

Aren't we supposed to help other people - care for them and welcome them?

Shouldn't we give cups of cold water?

Why should we impose on others and ask things of them?

Because - Jesus says those who welcome others are blessed by his presence, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me". Jesus wants people to get to experience his presence as they extend hospitality.

In this instance, Jesus is speaking about those who welcome his disciples, righteous people, and prophets. But in Matthew 25 he says that those who welcome strangers of any kind welcome him, even if they don't recognize him.

And it seems Jesus wants more people to be blessed by his presence as they offer hospitality. So, he calls us to make that possible by being in the role of vulnerable guests.

But this is so hard! As challenging as it is to practice hospitality, it's often easier to be a host than a guest. As a host, we get to stay in the comfort of our own house, institution, or congregation. We are at home, on familiar turf. We understand how things work.

When we are guests, we often have to step outside our comfort zones. We are dependent on the kindness of others. We are vulnerable. We wonder if we're intruding. I experienced all that when I was hosted by a woman named Paulina during a semester of study abroad in Zimbabwe. Paulina was a widow who survived by gardening, raising chickens and selling the things she sewed. She often struggled to have enough food. Her home consisted of three mud huts - one for sleeping, one for cooking and one for storage. I got to know Paulina at the women's cooperative where she sewed with other widows. We became friendly and she invited me and two other American seminary students to stay with her for a week.

Our professor and all of us were concerned about this invitation. We worried that our presence would be a burden for her. We didn't want to impose. We would bring gifts but we knew that she would still face hardship in hosting us. To be honest, I also wasn't sure I wanted to spend a week in a mud hut. Would I be

safe? Could I drink the water? After much discussion, my friends and I decided we needed to accept the invitation.

It was an amazing week. There were awkwardness and discomfort, but slowly we began to see each other as full people beyond all the cultural barriers. At the end, Paulina told us that hosting us brought her great honor and joy. She said, "Many would think that white people would come to serve me. You gave me the honor of letting me care for you." The experience was a blessing for Paulina and transformative for me.

Before studying in Zimbabwe, I had been friendly to the international students at Luther seminary but I had done little to really welcome them. They always sat at their own table and I never went out of my way to sit there and initiate conversation. When Paulina welcomed me, I discovered how much I needed to both give and receive hospitality. I experienced how Christ is present and at work when hospitality is extended and accepted.

This kind of thing often happens when we travel abroad, but we don't need to leave the country to experience similar things. The international students at Luther appreciate when host families have them over for supper, but often get really excited when they get to prepare a meal for Americans. Newer members of the congregation often express gratitude when they can offer kindness and hospitality to longtime members.

My husband Matt remembers how a guest to the United States welcomed him to Luther Seminary. Matt is very tall and back then he had long hair and a huge beard and looked, as he says, like a jackpine savage. When he showed up on campus he got a lot of strange looks and felt very out of place. He wasn't sure he belonged with all the pious, straightlaced seminary students. Then one day when he was sitting in the computer lab considering other grad school options, a huge Nigerian student named Musa Filibus came in. Musa said, "Hello, I see you are new. I am Musa and you are most welcome here." Matt was blown away that a guest to our country was extending such a warm welcome to him. His fears were alleviated and he realized there was room for him at the seminary.

We all have chances to go outside our comfort zones, be vulnerable, and experience welcome. We can visit a mosque and let our Muslim neighbors in Rochester or Cedar Falls host us. We can receive the hospitality of our Hispanic and Somali neighbors even as we also seek to advocate for them. We can receive and learn from those who have limited material goods. Those experiences will be a blessing for our hosts and they will work change in us as well. Christ will be present blessing and transforming us all - even if his presence isn't explicitly recognized or named.

Whoever welcomes a disciple or a stranger, welcomes Jesus.

May we offer others the chance to experience Jesus' presence in this way.

May we welcome others and experience Christ in the stranger.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.