

HOLY HOSPITALITY
Romans 6: 12-23 and Matthew 10: 40-42
June 28, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

The story goes something like this: A Kansan owned a general store and made it a habit to offer a verse of scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. One winter's day, a Texan stopped in, wanting to buy a blanket for his horse. The locals knew that the store stocked two types of blankets. One sold for \$60 and the expensive one for \$89.95. The store owner showed the first. "No, that is not good enough. I need something warmer for my horse," was the Texan's reply. So, the second one was shown. "No, you do not understand," said the Texan, "this is my horse and nothing is too good for my horse. Now show me the most expensive blanket you have."

The store became quiet as the storekeeper reached under the counter to the \$89.95 stack, pulled out a plaid one and spread it on the counter with great pride. "Now, this is the finest I have, one of a kind and I only have one. Colorfast, 100% wool with a tight weave. It sells for \$250." "Now you are talking," shouted out the Texan. "I will take it!" He counted out his money, folded the blanket and left with a Texas size grin on his face!

As the storekeeper opened the cash drawer and carefully counted the money, he recited from Matthew 25: 35, slightly altered, "He was a stranger and I took him in!" Now...that is a perfect example of what hospitality is NOT!

In a book called "Open Heart, Open Home," the author talks about the difference between hospitality and entertaining. Entertaining puts things before people. "As soon as I finish decorating and cleaning the house, THEN, I will start inviting people over." It is our space and we invite others when we are ready. Nothing is wrong with that. It is friendly, gracious, and enjoyable. It is just not what hospitality means in scripture.

Hospitality puts people first. It offers a place to encounter the holy. The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said that hospitality is not soft, sweet kindness, not tea parties, nor a general atmosphere of coziness! Hospitality in Jesus' day was risky, and still is, and if we take Christian hospitality seriously, it should be as necessary to our spirit as breathing is to our body. Nouwen fears we have so watered down our understanding of hospitality that it has become mostly mundane, hardly noticed, not much more than good manners; when, in fact, Jesus says that welcoming others is huge, spectacular, and even heroic at times.

Listening to Matthew's gospel, we know that when we open our hearts and doors to the little, the least, the unlikely---God pays attention. We here at Eastminster may not be able to finance a senior living center or day school (although, I feel pretty sure if God called us to do that, God would provide the means by which to fulfill that mission.)

But, that aside, we know that right now the missions we support through our benevolences are doing all they can to offer a cold cup of water to those who are dry in body, and through our

prayers, we give hope through encouraging words and small acts of kindnesses. We will one day again return to that time when we, here at Eastminster, can offer a cup for body and soul for those who come to our door. How we do that may look different after this pandemic, but I believe God is always putting different ways before us to serve. Matthew says that a small, humble act is discipleship, it is hospitality, it is a holy welcome.

A cup of cold water in Jesus day was a rarity. They did not have the endless source of water that we have running from our taps. They did not have ice. Early every morning women went to the village well to draw water. Coming from the bottom of a deep well, this water would be clear and cool, whereas a few minutes in the hot Palestinian sun would render the water lukewarm. So, you might offer your dinner guest water, but not cold water. To serve cold water to a guest, meant someone from the house running to the well, running home and hurrying to offer the guest the cool water – quickly before it got hot. In Jesus time, a cup of cold water was indeed a sign of great hospitality. Yet Jesus goes further. He says, “Whoever gives even a cup of cool water to one of these little ones,” will receive their reward. And what is that reward? It is a place in God’s kingdom.

Matthew’s gospel is also honest about the costs and the risks of discipleship; not all encounters will be welcoming and certain not holy. A few years ago, one of our breakfast friends called some wannabe followers of Jesus, boat riders. It is one thing to find a place of welcome in the boat, quite another to live in the rough waters with Jesus. Whether it be rough waters or smooth sailing, a *Christian Century* writer says that we can always find Jesus living in one place; a place of welcome because hospitality is much more than just an act; it is a place where the heart lives.

Think about this! At one time we Christians were the strangers, the Gentiles. By the grace of our Lord we were brought back into a relationship with our Creator. We were then called to welcome the stranger, offer a cup of cold water because that is what God did for us, in Jesus Christ. Biblical hospitality means that we provide that same invitation for a healed relationship to strangers, outsiders, and yes, even those we consider enemies. Barbara Brown Taylor says that we are not meant to be consumers of God’s love, but providers.

When you look back at Matthew’s gospel, it does not take long to see Jesus living in that place of welcome. His compassion, his holy welcome is extended to smelly demoniacs, to wayward women, the sightless, the sick, the lonely and lame, even the ones who mocked and made his life miserable. And certainly, in our day and time, we cannot deny that the world is not the best place of welcome. We live in a nation of strangers, a society in which walls are built between people. We lock ourselves behind our doors. I pray every day that being behind closed doors or masks will stop being a reason for division, but a gesture of our commitment to take care of one another.

We do live in a world where bad things happen and so we are geared toward even simple acts of self-protection, so giving a cold cup of water, figuratively or literally can be dangerous. But, we are called to take that risk, not because we have determined that someone is sincere in their need or is a member of the deserving poor; we do it because that is what Jesus has commanded us to do.

But, even in that commandment is freedom. Paul reminds us in the Epistle reading that we can choose to embrace our Lord's commandments or ignore. Ignoring makes us slaves to sin. Embracing leads to a life of service to others and to God, and that he says, is real freedom. In a world where so many only receive rejection, our little, unspectacular moments of generosity can make all the difference. It may be the only sign of the love of Christ that some other person will ever experience.

We are preparing for a never-before-tried event, hosting Synod Youth Workshop virtually. We are organizing youth and adults across Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, and this year beyond our Synod to Missouri and New Jersey. And while there may be a few less forms, I promise you they have more instructions, forms, and schedules than Jesus ever gave his disciples.

Obviously, these are necessary for the SYW. They are NOT necessary to the work, the mission, the sharing of a cold cup of water in Jesus' name. Jesus' instructions are this: show hospitality and give a cold cup of water to those who are thirsty.

Welcoming the stranger, providing a cup of cold water, serving as Jesus would serve is what Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco sees as its mission. Situated across from a public park, the church came face to face every day with the homeless, the addicted, the ill. They could have closed their doors; instead, they opened them even wider. Figuratively, the giving of one cup of cold water by one person changed the church from a welcoming location to a living, breathing place of holy welcome.

An outsider wandered into the church one Sunday during worship. Street-wise, street-weary and so addicted that he really did not know which street would be his home from day to day. The service had already begun, and it was hard to see an empty space, so the man just kept walking down the aisle toward the front of the church.

People were obviously uncomfortable. The man finally found a seat, right in the middle of the floor in front of the chancel. Some church members later said that they were glad he sat down and did not fall; others were still anxious. Then they heard more movement in the aisle. An usher decked out in a suit, stately, dignified, silver-haired, eighty-something and using a cane was making his way toward the man. Charged with the responsibility of making sure worship was conducted with at least some sense of reverence, people were just as anxious about what was about to happen between the two men.

Pastor Cecil Williams had continued the liturgy of the worship service, trying to not draw attention to the situation. It took the usher a good bit of time to reach the front. At that point, if you are the pastor, you probably need to be silent because no one is listening anyway. So he was, and so was the congregation. The older usher dropped his cane and holding the arm of a pew, he lowered himself to the floor and shook the man's hand, and there he sat, arthritis and all. I could have continued, Pastor Williams said later as he repeated the story, but I stopped. So moved was I that my voice stuck in my throat when I said: "What I was about to preach, you would not have remembered. What you have just seen, you will never forget." A cup of cold water in the form of a welcoming handshake.

The world around us Eastminster is thirsty. Let us be honest, Eastminster is thirsty right now, not because our faith is any less, but our spirits are certainly missing the hospitality and fellowship of one another right now and those who visit us.

But, let me remind you how we are still being the body of Christ to others, just in case, we feel discouraged or disconnected from the work the Lord has given us.

*We have not missed a worship service since this all began on March 15. We have videoed services, emailed, mailed, texted, placed them on the social media outlets.

*Care bags, messages, notes, calls are happening among you, checking on others and making sure all are ok.

*Three Sunday School classes have begun exploring scripture again.

*Session continues to meet, via Zoom, monthly to care for the business and ministry of the church.

*The Re-Entry Task Force is meeting each week, monitoring the pandemic to ensure the safest possible time to come together again. A revised plan is being presented to session today, and we will share the results of that decision.

*The Nursery Advisory Group has been busy making repairs, following flooding, and remodeling, thanks in large part to insurance monies.

*Ten children have received their “Camp in a Box” packets and are enjoying some nature adventures.

*Two of our youth are attending Virtual SYW, four of our members are serving on staff, and one serving as an adult sponsor.

*I have tried to keep us praying together, even in our distance, via email and mailed devotions.

*We have been invited to try some small group fellowship time.

*We are looking into a phone messaging system that will offer a thought and prayer.

*Our benevolences are still receiving the support we committed to in 2020.

So, Eastminster, thank you for all the ways you are a living, breathing place of welcome. Simple gestures. Humble acts. Christ-like words. To us, perhaps this is a mundane-no big deal-matter of good manners undertaking. But in the eyes of Jesus, it is a cup of cold water, holy hospitality, and the stuff of God’s kingdom. Amen