

True Hospitality
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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Siobhan Garrigan is a liturgical theologian from Yale and she was traveling around Ireland researching her latest book, which came out last year. She arrived at a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland and she was incredibly pleased to be greeted at the door of the church by two church members who were ushers of some sort, charged with welcoming newcomers when they arrived on Sunday morning. These two women asked her name and for the first names of any other newcomers who came to attend church that Sunday.

And this was welcoming and hospitable until Siobhan figured out what was happening—the women would hear people give their first names and would then draw some conclusions about the cultural and religious identities of each person based on their name. The people who had so-called "Protestant names" were welcomed into the church with smiles and warmth and they were shown their way to their pews. But those with apparently "Catholic names," like the Marias, the Catherines, and the Patricks . . . well they were told that they were certainly in the wrong church and sent on their way.

This account was recorded by William Goettler, a colleague of Siobhan's at Yale who was shocked to learn that this is still a current practice in Northern Ireland and who also reluctantly admits that we tend to define people in our American churches too. But maybe in different ways, maybe in more subtle ways.

I have sometimes felt in conversations with ministerial colleagues in particular that it would just be better to give them my resume as opposed to answering the typical line of questioning. It begins with, "Where did you go to school?" And then either, "Oh, that's a good school, or I feel like I've heard of Elon somewhere along the line." And then I may get defensive and snarky, depending on my mood and say, "Well Elon is the most beautiful school in America according to some reviews AND according to U.S. News and World Report, it's one of the best schools in the South in many categories."

And then I inquire, "And where did you go to school or seminary?" And then my line of questioning and judgment commences. In many of your professions, you may have similar experiences—where did you get your Bachelor's, Master's, J.D. or Ph.D. Where did you do your training? What jobs have you held? What books or articles have you published? What's your research about? What kind of experiences have you had?

Sometimes we ask these questions of one another and of our colleagues from a place of genuine interest. Being an optimist, I try to give people the benefit of the doubt and I often think this is the case. These questions are asked because we want to know more about peoples' histories or backgrounds, where they've been or where they want to go in the future. But Professor Goettler from Yale admits, "We are curious about education and profession. In a church community like the one I know best, the higher the level of education, the warmer the community will be. While none will be turned away, we will tell ourselves that we simply have more in common with those who are like us."

And we have to take this admission a step further. We have to ask ourselves if this is so different from standing at the church door asking people what their names are to determine whether they are Catholic or Protestant, greeting the apparent Protestants warmly with open arms and turning the apparent Catholics away without a second thought.

Now I don't think that we here at Pilgrim would ever turn anyone away outright. And I feel like this church does a good job of being welcoming to all who enter our doors—we certainly have an inclusive statement of welcome that I believe we stand by. Our statement of welcome even includes "educational background" which says a lot about who we are at this church, that we really are welcoming to everyone and your educational level doesn't really matter in the way we will treat you and welcome you.

But because hospitality is at the heart of the Gospel, because radical hospitality is at the heart of our United Church of Christ, because hospitality is so key to being the church in the world, because Christians in all countries of all denominations are not always hospitable . . . we can't just pat ourselves on the back and say, "job well done" and never think about the call to true hospitality again.

In fact, we heard some distinct words from Jesus about hospitality in Matthew today, about how the disciples should be received. And this passage also points out how the disciples should receive others in return. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." When we welcome others, we welcome Jesus.

But why would Jesus have to make hospitality so explicit, why did he have to specifically speak to the disciples about being welcomed anyway? The answer lies in the way the early church functioned and who made up the early church. Jesus had a habit of wandering from place to place where he would preach and teach. Jesus didn't even really have an explicit home base he operated out of during his ministry—he would stay with friends and new disciples, he would often preach outside or even from a boat with the people crowding the shores of the sea.

When he realized that he would no longer be with the disciples, when he was starting to face some hostility and adversity, he knew that his followers would have to carry on his ministry without him. So he gives them a discipleship model, and tells them that when people welcome them, they in turn welcome him. It's almost as if this would be a line for the followers of Jesus to say to get their foot in the door after he is no longer with them.

The disciples would go from community to community and home to home, they would preach and teach and could even quote today's passage to help them speak to the people. In *The Message*, a contemporary translation of the Bible, the passage is, "Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it."

Jesus is giving the disciples a pep talk of sorts. He's telling them that they are messengers of God and when people accept them as such, those people are just as good as they are. When they go to help people and someone accepts that help and care, well that's as good as being the helper in the first place. It's a give and take, giving and receiving, loving and being loved.

So we know that Jesus gave these instructions to the disciples, gave them some courage for the future, knowing that they wouldn't always be accepted. We all have heard it before, but it's worth repeating—Jesus' disciples were not the leaders of society, they were not the well-to-do, the educated, the elite, the people who had tons of power and prestige. Scholar Jung Young Lee relates, "Jesus' public ministry may best be characterized as a life of marginality. He was a homeless man with a group of homeless people around him. The people Jesus called to be his disciples were marginalized people. None came from the religious establishment; they were not elders, high priests, or Judaic-law teachers. Most were fishermen, except for a tax collector

and a clerk, Judas, who betrayed Jesus. His other associations were primarily with the poor, weak, outcast, foreigners, and prostitutes."

Lee presents a clearer picture of why Jesus would need to give his followers a pep talk, why he needed to give them words that could allow them to have some access to the people in this society who may not have been outright open and hospitable to them. They might have been trying to speak to people who were not of the same socio-economic class, or of the same educational level. They might have been trying to speak to people who didn't trust them or have any use for illiterate Galilean fishermen. Hospitality was of vital importance to Jesus' ministry and he knew that the disciples would have to take all that they learned from him to go out into society.

And the call to hospitality, the call to welcome all in Christ's name as Christ welcomed all during his lifetime, this had major consequences in the future of Christianity. One of my favorite time periods to study is Medieval Europe and I recall being told by a professor of mine that Christianity really came to shine during the periods the Bubonic Plagues swept across Europe. He explained that some people would abandon their diseased family members at the first sign of the Black Death. Sick people would be wandering all over the place, seeking help and refuge. Irreverently I think of Monty Python and the famous, "Bring out your dead!" scene where a family member on the mend gets clubbed over the head in the street when he claims to feel better. That scene is hilarious but there's also some truth there as to how people reacted to the Black Death. Some families were not very keen on caring for sick relatives and contacting the disease themselves.

And so the sick would often find their way to monasteries and convents, to be cared for by Christian monks and nuns. Of course, you had some crazy preachers saying that this was a scourge from God and people would practice self-flagellation for their sins. But Christian charity shone through during this time period and people saw the Church as that place of radical hospitality—the safe place that would try to help and greet them with open arms. And the monasteries and convents were hit hard by the Black Death as a result, and a clergy shortage resulted in the aftermath of these periods of disease because of these religious folk answering the Christian call to service and hospitality.

Jesus speaks about hospitality by calling on people to be welcoming. In the eyes of Jesus, "Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help." Because it seems to me that this gets to the heart of welcome and discipleship, the give and take, the caring for and being cared for.

Scholar Ana Maria Pineda says it this way "This circle of mutual hospitality can embrace and transform the people who enter it. The early church, which met in houses, grew up turning hosts into guests and guests into hosts." The monks and nuns who cared for the sick and the dying often got sick themselves, and had to be nursed back to health or comforted as they died. And these were people who did not always have a lot in common; these were people often from different classes of society who definitely had different educational levels. True hospitality, answering Christ's call to service and welcome carried the day in some towns across Europe during these periods of disease and unrest.

And so we have many examples to draw from in our model of Christianity and Church today. We can stand at the doors with clipboards, note the names of those who enter and welcome those people who may be like us and turn away those we tell ourselves we have nothing in common with. Or we can care for all of God's children, all of our sisters and brothers, the poor and the rich, the sick and the well, the Ph.D.s and the high school graduates. And if we open ourselves up, then truly we "won't lose out on a thing."

May it be so with us, Amen.