

*“I saw a stranger yester’ een. I put food in the eating place,  
Drink in the drinking place, Music in the listening place,  
And in the sacred name of the Triune, He blessed myself and my house,  
My cattle and my dear ones, And the lark sang in her song,  
Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise”*

-Ancient Celtic Rune of Hospitality

**Texts:** Exodus 23: 6-10 & 1 Peter 2: 6-11, 16.

We sat around the table together. 10 people, with almost nothing in common. Four of us were Presbyterian, one Methodist, one Episcopal, one Roman Catholic, one Agnostic, one who grew up Hindu but had converted to Sikhism, and one Muslim student at Greenville Tech who came in late after class. We were strangers in the fullest sense of the word. None of us had ever met before that night. And once we started sharing our stories with each other we realized just how different we were. We were strangers, and yet we sat around the table together.

That was, by far, the most diverse meal I’ve ever been a part of. The Greenville Interfaith Forum organized dozens of these meals around the city that night as part of their *Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues*. People of all religious backgrounds gathered in homes to share a meal together and to share their stories. It wasn’t a time for converting others. It wasn’t a time for debate. It was a time to listen...to listen to strangers. All 10 of us were very different from each other, but there was one thing that we had in common, that night, around that table, we were all guests—guests in the home of a gracious host.

Our host had prepared a wonderful meal—it was vegetarian because of the dietary restrictions of one of the guests. She welcomed us each as we came in the door, she provided food and drinks, she opened her home to complete strangers for more than 4 hours of discussion, and then she stayed up late cleaning up after we had all gone. That night, all of us, all 10 of the strangers, were greeted with wonderful hospitality—not just polite Southern hospitality, but true Christian hospitality. And somehow through the act of being welcomed, we were able to let our guard down and really listen to each other. Having received hospitality from our host, we were then able to see the people sitting across the table from us, not as strangers, but as fellow guests.

This transforming relationship between guests and hosts—this call to welcome the stranger—is desperately needed in today’s world, a world where strangers are increasingly seen as enemies. A world where differences in religion are used to justify terrorist attacks. A world where differences in ethnicity are inspire horrific genocides. A world where differences in sexuality lead to horrible hate crimes. A world where differences in appearance or clothing grow into practices of bullying in school. A world where differences in cultural backgrounds cause close-mindedness, bigotry, prejudice, and intolerance. Today’s world desperately needs to hear words of welcome being spoken across dividing lines. Today’s world needs to see examples of strangers being welcomed as guests. Whether at the dinner table, on the street, in homeless shelters, refugee camps, school cafeterias, or even church sanctuaries, today’s world needs to see the church responding to the call to practice Christian hospitality.

As important as hospitality is amidst our present situations, though, the call to welcome the stranger, is by no means something new. It is an old calling, an ancient calling, a Reformed calling.

As we heard in our Older Testament reading this morning, the people of Israel were given the call to welcome the stranger. As part of the covenant law, the word of the Lord, spoken

through Moses included this charge, “**You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.**” The Hebrew people were called to be hospitable to aliens, foreigners, vagabonds, refugees, strangers. And this calling was grounded in their very identity as a people. Remember, the Hebrews were themselves strangers in Egypt. They were foreigners, illegal aliens who were forced into slavery by the rich and powerful. Once they fled from pharaoh, they became a people on the run. The story of this alien nation continues through the rest of scripture. The wandering nomads finally settled in Canaan, a land that already belonged to others. They were strangers in the Promised Land. Then, after centuries of building up power and prestige, they again became aliens, refugees, exiles, forced to flee from their homes and live in captivity in Babylon. In time, they were freed and returned home, only to be conquered again and again, first by Alexander the Great and his Greek army, then by the mighty and oppressive Roman Empire. Being aliens, or strangers, was an important part of the identity of the biblical Hebrews. And that is precisely why they are given the charge to care for the aliens whom they encounter. They are called to welcome the stranger, because they know, deep deep down, what it means to live the life of the stranger.

The story of the stranger is not just a national story; it was also a very real particular story in the lives of our mothers and fathers in the faith. Think of lonely, barren, elderly Abraham and Sarah; Jacob the conman on the run; stuttering Moses, who lived in hiding after killing an Egyptian; Ruth the emigrant; puny and scrawny David; Elijah, the smelly wild-man of the desert. The forbearers of our faith were folks that many of us would today we crack jokes about and certainly wouldn't invite to come to dinner.

This story of the stranger continues with Jesus in the New Testament. Born to migrant parents, the one for whom there was no room in the inn, Jesus knew the life of the stranger. Cast out from his home town, wandering homeless with a band of smelly fishermen, the son of God was rejected by those in power. And in his ministry, he surrounded himself with the strangers, the outcasts, the sinners of his day. Christ's work and mission brought together those who were despised by their culture. And yet, Christ, the stranger, lived a life of hospitality, welcoming all whom he met. His hosting brought a group of misfits and outcasts together as a community of guests. This community of the welcomed in turn grew into the church. The earliest churches, in fact, met in houses, with hosts offering their homes for strangers to worship in. These gatherings always included sharing the communion meal, so that all the strangers were gathered together around the table of the Lord, where Christ's call to hospitality was made a reality in the shared meal. As Peter puts it in his letter that we read this morning, “**the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.**” Christ, the stranger, the outcast, became the head of the church, and this new community grew through the simple yet profound act of welcoming the stranger as they themselves had been welcomed by Christ.

The story of the guests who become the hosts, continued for many centuries. At times, the church has become distracted and forgotten its call to welcome the stranger. One such time was in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the time that we often refer to as the Protestant Reformation. As you may have noticed on your bulletin, today is Reformation Sunday, a day on which protestant churches throughout the world celebrate their heritage and the story of Martin Luther, a German monk, who's nailing of the 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg ignited the movement that would grow into the Reformation. We remember his story on this day, the Sunday before All Saints day, because tradition holds that it was on All Hallow's Eve (the day before All Saints Day) in 1517 that Luther posted his theses.

Well, this morning, I'd like for us to remember another story from that era, one which isn't celebrated nearly as much, but one which has particular significance for us as Presbyterians. It happened sixteen years later, on another All Saints Day, in 1533. That was the day that a preacher named Nicholas Cop preached a sermon in Paris criticizing many of the actions of the church in France.<sup>i</sup> Cop, like Luther, was alarmed at some of the abuses of power which he saw in the church. And, rather than welcoming this stranger with a new and different opinion, the church in Paris sought to have Cop and his friends arrested and killed. So, the small group of Protestants in the city had to flee for their lives. One particular young man had to disguise himself in a costume just to make it out of France alive. Today, we know this young man as John Calvin, the brilliant theologian, the founder of the Reformed Tradition. But in 1533, he was a man on the run. An exile. A refugee from France, wandering and looking for a home. In time, he settled in the Swiss town of Geneva, and, after some tumultuous early years, began to transform the city into a protestant community and a place of welcome for other religious refugees from all over Europe. Calvin, the stranger who was welcomed as a guest, in turn became a host to reformed outcasts who were looking for safety and shelter. Now, Calvin, was by no means perfect, and he could at times be quite inhospitable with those who opposed him, but none-the-less, his impact on the community of Geneva to make it a place of welcome for strangers was profound. In a sense, our Reformed tradition grew out of this Genevan hospitality. One such guest that Calvin welcomed was a Frenchman named Louis Bourgeois, who composed the famous “Old Hundredth” hymn tune that we sang this morning in worship.<sup>ii</sup> Another political refugee welcomed by Calvin to Geneva was an outlaw on the run from Scotland, a man named John Knox, who took Calvin's theology and ideas about the church back to his homeland and led the Scottish Reformation, out of which our Presbyterian Church grew. So, in one sense, the story of our Reformed tradition, the story of the Presbyterian Church, is the story of guests becoming hosts, the story of people responding to God's call to welcome the stranger.

Though this call has been ignored at times in our history, the call to hospitality, radical Christian hospitality, is still being followed by many in our midst. For some, it is as simple as inviting neighbors to church or surprising friends with warm sweet potato pies. For others it is as natural as asking someone to sit next to them in the lunch room or befriending the new kid in class. For some it is as customary as serving dinner to people who are homeless and really listening to the stories they have to tell. For some people, Christian hospitality comes easy, those folks are natural hosts, and we have much to learn from them. But for many of us, the call to welcome the stranger is something we struggle with. It requires that we let our guard down. It means asking hard questions as we look to see who in our lives and society is in need of welcome. It means not being able to follow the same old rules as we interact with people whose cultures are drastically different than our own. It means learning how to see beyond stereotypes to catch glimpses of real people. It means coming to terms with our own strangeness in order to appreciate the strangers in our life as gifts from God. For some of us, welcoming the stranger is hard work, very hard work, and yet, if we are to follow the call of Christ in our lives then the practice of Christian hospitality is at the center of that call.

As the Steve reminded the children this morning, Jesus told his followers that it is in the face of the stranger that we see him. From Matthew 25: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The theologian Miroslav Volf knows something of this call to radical Christian hospitality. He is someone that many of us would probably consider a stranger. He is a native Yugoslavian, someone who grew up in the midst of a communist regime. His parents were Christians, and his father was a Pentecostal pastor. His background, accent, and particular practice of Christianity would identify him as an outsider if he were amongst us this morning. Yet, he tells the story of radical hospitality being practiced by his family for one particular stranger. In the book *Practicing Theology*, Volf tells this story:

“His name I have forgotten, but the image of him at our table is indelible. On the first Sunday of every month he would make his way from the back country to the city of Novi Sad in Yugoslavia, where my father was pastor of a small Pentecostal church. Our guest, the lone Pentecostal in his village...would come to our church for Holy Communion. After feasting at the Lord’s table, he would join our family for the Sunday meal. A rough-hewn figure, both intriguing and slightly menacing, he would sit quietly, a bit hunched, at the table opposite me...

“I resented his coming, for when he entered our house my memory would always play back a sound from his previous visit. The sound was that of my mother’s [delicious] soup...leaping noisily across the gap between his spoon and his mouth through his mustache...Though my parents never said anything, I could sense their unease with our visitor’s manners. Yet they not only thought it important to invite him repeatedly, but also admired the robustness of his commitment despite the great adversity he suffered on account of his faith....

“...they were extending the invitation to this stranger because they did not think one should hold the table of the Lord...apart from the table of our home...Had I objected [saying], “But must we invite him every time he comes!?”—they would have responded, “As the Lord gave his body and blood for us sinners, so we ought to be ready to share not only our belongings, but also something of our very selves, with strangers.” The circle of our table was opened up by the wounds of Christ, and a stranger was let in. Had I continued to protest, they would have reminded me of that grand [heavenly] meal whose host will be the Triune God, a meal at which people of every tribe and tongue will be feasting. I had better be ready to sit next to him at that meal, they would have insisted.”<sup>iii</sup>

Volf learned how our practices of hospitality are grounded in God’s deep hospitality shown to us. And friends, that is the good news of the gospel—that in Jesus Christ, God has graciously welcomed us and included us in the covenant of God’s love. A place has been made for us at the table. As 1 Peter says, “**Once [we] were not a people, but now [we] are God’s people.**” So, as we have been welcomed by Christ, let us respond to God’s grace by welcoming the strangers in our lives (whomever they may be), and by living as hospitable people who reflect the love of our host, the Triune God, to whose name be all glory and honor, dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> T.H.L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 22-23.

<sup>ii</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr. “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. IV*, 1079. McCann describes the hymn “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” as the “banner hymn of the Reformed tradition” because of its theological reflection on life lived in grateful response to God, the tune’s connection to Calvin through Bourgeois, and the text’s connection to Knox through his friend, William Kethe.

<sup>iii</sup> Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” in *Practicing Theology*. Ed Volf & Dorothy C. Bass, 248-249.