

From 'Xenophobia' to 'Philoxenia'

(From 'Fear of Strangers' to 'Love for Strangers')

A Reflection on Biblical Hospitality

3rd Anniversary of our Hispanic Ministry Program

Luke 10:1-12, 16-17 Leviticus 19:33-34
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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"From *xenophobia* to *philoxenia*." This has to be one of my favorite sermon titles since I began preaching. Those two Greek-based words tell us a lot about how we are to live out a life of Christian ethics – how we should treat other people. I have provided the translation of these strange-sounding words as the subtitle to this sermon: **From 'fear of strangers' (xenophobia) to 'love for strangers' (philoxenia)**.

How you and I treat strangers is a reflection upon the biblical concept of demonstrating genuine hospitality. This certainly applies to our daily personal lives. But in light of the fact that today we are celebrating the 3rd anniversary of our Hispanic Ministry program here at College Hill, I especially want to focus this issue of hospitality on how it applies to our life together as a community of faith.

Before getting into various ways of demonstrating hospitality, you may be wondering how I got this theme from this morning's Gospel Reading from Luke 10. This passage usually leads to a sermon on evangelism and church growth, and rightly so.

In this story, Luke reports that Jesus commissions seventy persons and sends them out in pairs to help spread the good news of the kingdom of God. The role of these seventy was to be about the work of evangelism. And since a person traveling and working alone can be unsafe, as well as lead to becoming discouraged or overwhelmed, Jesus sent them out in pairs. This should remind us that working with others is often the best way to approach church work as well.

When these pairs of missionary evangelists entered a town they were instructed by Jesus to stay in the home of one of the residents, and remain there throughout their visit. This is where we are confronted with the issue of hospitality.

The ancient world had very strong customs about hospitality. As a host, you were faced with one of two options: you could either welcome the stranger into your home, or you could turn them away. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, we read how the Hebrew people were commanded to not mistreat or oppress strangers, traveling foreigners, or resident aliens of any kind. But not only were strangers not to be oppressed, they were to be treated as if they were true citizens of the community, as native-born citizens, no less.

As an added explanation as to why they should be motivated to extend charity and hospitality to strangers, the Hebrew people are reminded that they, too, were once strangers and resident aliens in the land of Egypt. Because of this, the Jewish people of Jesus' day should be able, then, to empathize with the foreigners and strangers who now live among them.

Unless you are of Native American descent, that applies to each of us in the United States of America today as well, for we (or at least our ancestors) were also once foreigners and strangers and resident aliens in this country.

In a way, it's like saying: Treat these folks right, because you (or your people) know what it's like to be a stranger in a strange place.

Now for those of you who have been a member of this church for many, many years, you may have to search way back in your memories to remember what it was like when you first visited and were a stranger here at College Hill. But I'd like everyone here this morning to **think back to how you were welcomed here by this congregation, whether you first visited 40 years ago or just last week.**

There's no doubt all of us, at one time or another, have felt like a stranger – whether in a new town, or a new job, or a new school, or a new church. And there is often discomfort in those situations of being new.

It's important to remind ourselves, then, that **the theme of hospitality runs from cover to cover in the Bible.** It emphasizes that the people of God have an obligation, a religious obligation, to treat others in the same manner we would like ourselves to be treated. Story after story in the Bible reveals an almost sacred bond between hosts and guests. And most of these stories reveal that **it is not only the stranger who is blessed, but the host as well.**

Strangers in the Bible are often portrayed as the bearers of gifts that add to, not diminish, the well-being of their hosts. **That's how we are to approach visitors among us – as a blessing.** In his book, *New Testament Hospitality*, John Koenig tells us that “rather than burdening or threatening us, the stranger comes to teach the deeper lessons of life and to enable ministry.”

Luke also reminds us of an important element in this ancient custom: To receive strangers was to receive the one who sent them, and in this particular New Testament story receiving these travelling disciples was to receive Jesus, and therefore to receive God and to be open to the kingdom of God. That is the underlying expectation in this biblical story. Conversely, it states that those who reject these messengers reject Jesus, and to reject Jesus is to reject God who sent him.

So to prepare the seventy evangelists for possible rejection and even danger, Jesus tells them that they are being sent out “like lambs into the midst of wolves” (v. 3). Hopefully, that's not how visitors experience us. ☺ If these pairs of evangelists do not receive hospitality from a particular town, then they are to move on to the next town, wiping the dust off their feet as they leave.

So what I would like for us to do this morning is approach this story with a bit of a twist. Instead of the common approach of casting ourselves into the role of the seventy disciples (an evangelism emphasis), **let's cast ourselves, and this congregation, into the role of the townspeople. Our challenge, then, is to decide whether or not to extend and demonstrate hospitality to the strangers in our midst.**

I know that I have said the following before, but I want to make another strong case again this morning: **any congregation's ability to offer true biblical hospitality lies**

at the very heart of its evangelism efforts! Ultimately, it plays a major role in our ability to grow as a congregation.

Hospitality, however, is more than just a church program, or just the responsibility of one church committee or ministry team. **Hospitality is everyone's responsibility!** True biblical hospitality is also central to all of our spiritual lives, and it affects all of our relationships, including those within our congregation, our neighborhoods, our schools, our work places, and even our families.

Let me go back now and share just a bit more of what genuine hospitality really entails. **Biblical hospitality is not the same as simply being friendly and offering words of welcome**, even though that is a part of it. Most good church folks, in any congregation, are basically friendly and can muster a "good morning". Genuine hospitality is much deeper than that.

Biblical hospitality begins with the basic attitude toward others that calls for entering into relationship with them. That not only takes time and effort, it is also a bit risky. As a congregation, the risk is that new folks may actually join this community of faith – as many have this past month. And with new people come new ideas, and new leadership, and new relationships.

For some folks, while they say they want their church to grow, on the inside they may find that it's also a bit scary. For others, it's also a threat to the status quo – the way things are now, always have been, and always should be.

As spiritual author Henri Nouwen explains it, **we must open up within ourselves (personally and as a congregation) a space, an open and safe space that welcomes the stranger and allows that person to enter – and perhaps most importantly, allows them to be themselves.** Only then can transformation take place. Hospitality, then, has everything to do with treating and welcoming people the way that Jesus did.

I'm going to close with a quote by the Rev. Fred Bernhard, from his book *Widening the Welcome of your Church: Biblical Hospitality & the Vital Congregation*. This book, by the way, comes with a study guide, so we may want to explore this as a church class or book study group. Bernhard writes:

Hospitality is not something optional for the church. It is in fact the very essence of the church's life and witness. As you learn to improve your practice of hospitality, you will find relationships transformed not only with the stranger but also with those in the body of Christ you already know and with your friends and family.

So let us work hard, with God's help, to move beyond xenophobia, a fear of strangers, to philoxenia, a love for strangers. We have done this, and I pray will continue doing so, by welcoming those who often find themselves unwelcomed in other communities of faith.

Amen.