

The Role of Hospitality in Building Authentic Community

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21 Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Just over a week ago, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery gathered here in Tulsa for one of our quarterly meetings. While there's a whole host of things I'd love to discuss with you about that meeting, I want to share with you something a bit different that occurred at this gathering.

Matt Johnson, from the Apprentice Institute, was our guest preacher. He also shared a special presentation entitled, "Intentional Community." In order to form authentic and intentional community, Matt said, we need what he called an overarching Rule of Life. He gave the following example. **Picture a triangle.** At the top point is **Prayer**. It leads to a second point, **Hospitality**, which in turn leads to the third point, **Justice**. And in the very center of the triangle is the presence of **Christ** – God's Sacred Presence among and within us. All together, it forms and guides a community of faith in a model of discernment – a desire to know and then work toward God's agenda for our life and ministry together.

This isn't a new idea. People in the area of spirituality have always known that **a balanced life of faith involves times of contemplation and times of action. A balance between Being and Doing. For any community of faith, including this one, of equal importance to the inward and outward dimensions of our journey of faith is how we live together and treat one another. That important step is hospitality.**

Hospitality, which I will explore more in depth in just a moment, is more than kind words of welcome. Hospitality, from a biblical standpoint, involves something much deeper: **welcoming the 'other' into our midst by making room for them in our hearts.** There is an intentional emphasis on **respect, dignity, and openness to differences.**

Hospitality must be a core element in how we choose to live together in community. Back in my youth minstry days, we would make a Group Covenant that was made up of a list of values we all agreed to live by. A typical group covenant would usually include things like:

- listen carefully to each other
 - respect the right of each person to have their own opinions
 - attend and participate fully
 - make everyone feel part of the group
 - honor confidentiality of what is shared in the group setting
- and if it wasn't already suggested, I would always add,
- have fun

You may be interested to know that a year or so ago, when walking through the Kid Connection room on the second floor here at the church, I saw a group covenant of sorts posted on the wall. I was very impressed. The list is still posted. It's called the "Big Kid Rule List" and it includes things like:

- Be Awesome
- Be nice
- Always be polite
- Help younger kids
- Share
- Help Clean Up
- Be respectful of everyone

And my favorite:

- If younger kids are sad, make them feel better.

Ah, the wisdom of young people. **Group covenants do indeed serve a very important role in how any community decides how to live and be with one another.**

One of the first activities when committees gather in a week for the General Assembly of the PCUSA in Portland, Oregon, is to talk about their covenant expectations of what will guide their relationships and their time together. As both a commissioner from this presbytery and as a moderator of one of the GA committees I am looking forward to this process.

Most congregations, and basically any organization for that matter, also live by, or are guided by, what is usually an unwritten or unspoken covenant agreement. That's how I would like us to approach the list provided by the apostle Paul in **Romans 12**, as a kind of group covenant. It is printed, in part, on this morning's worship bulletin. These verses serve almost as a **"To Do" list in how to live together in authentic community**. They serve as crucial traits that we are to exhibit as Christians, as followers of Jesus. In actuality, what it provides is **a window onto what life in Christ looks like in community**. Therefore, we can use it as a kind of **measuring stick to see how well we are doing**. My thoughts, at this point, again turn to our Presbyterian denomination, which at times suffers greatly from a lack of authentic community and trust.

As we look at this list, two major themes emerge: first, ways Christians are to manifest genuine love (vv. 10-13), and second, obligations we have towards strangers and enemies (vv. 14-20). It begins with the directive, **"Let your love be genuine"** (v. 9). That almost hints that love can be ungentle, which of course isn't really love at all. "Genuine" means love without pretense, without play-acting, without ulterior motives. It literally means, without hypocrisy. Not surprisingly, love stands at the very top of the list. It provides, in fact, the context for Paul's other exhortations, which flesh-out an understanding of what love entails.

One of the ways we love one another, Paul states, is with **mutual affection**. The word affection, in this context, means **true and honest caring for the well-being of one another**. Are there not times, however, when we don't truly care all that much for the well-being of another?

Paul goes on to add that we are to rejoice with others who are rejoicing, and weep with those who weep. Only genuine **empathy** for one another can make this possible. **With authentic community, then, comes responsibility toward one another**. That's a big task! Therefore, Paul also tells us to outdo one another in **showing honor**.

How do you show honor to others in this congregation when we gather together? Extend that to how you show honor to those with whom you interact on a daily basis.

Next, Paul tells us: "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" (vv. 11-12). **An authentic community of faith is marked by energy, dedication, hopefulness, patience, and perseverance in spiritual disciplines.** There's an entire sermon, of course, in each one of these. And there are several other exhortations in this 'to do' list like: bless those who curse you, associate with the lowly, be humble, and overcome evil with good. Again, these are an outgrowth of living in genuine love for one another.

I want to focus, however, on just one particular exhortation in Paul's list. I think the well-being of any congregation, or presbytery, or denomination, or even the nation itself, depends on it. The second half of Romans 12:13 commands us to: "**Extend hospitality to strangers.**"

What is biblical hospitality? As I mentioned earlier, it's way more than just a kind and casual, "Good morning, how are you? It's good to see you and I'm glad you're here." While that's part of it, that's only the very beginning. Genuine hospitality demands much more of ourselves, including reaching out beyond our own comfort zones. **Hospitality is a way of saying, "Everyone counts!" Everyone! There can be no genuine relationship without hospitality.** Here's why.

Renowned author on Christian spirituality, **Henri Nouwen** writes about the meaning of hospitality in his book, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. In a discussion of the movement "From Hospitality to Hospitality," Nouwen writes:

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. . .

Hospitality creates a friendly and safe space where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

Hospitality is a huge issue for me, as I know it is for this congregation. So in my studies I came across a book not too long ago entitled, **Radical Hospitality**, by Lonni Collins Pratt with Father Daniel Homan, OSB, a Benedictine monk. I hadn't actually read the book, however, until P.J. Brobston, our moderator of the Worship & Music ministry team, used it as part of his opening devotional at the February Session Meeting. P.J. passed out strips of paper that had quotes from the book about the meaning of hospitality. We read them and then shared any personal reflections. I will now read some of them, along with additional ones that caught my attention. As I do, reflect upon these understandings of how genuine (radical) hospitality can affect your relationships and our authentic community together.

To become hospitable means finding ways to welcome the marginalized, forgotten, and misunderstood among us. (pg. x)

Hospitality is about transforming our hearts and our communities. It is about **justice for every soul.** (pg. xvii)

One of the peculiarities about really hospitable people is that they don't go out looking for ways to be hospitable; they simply give it a try when there's a chance to do so. It isn't about results, it's about changing the universe by **becoming available to one person in one sliver of time**. (pg. xviii)

Hospitality is not about social graces but about **mutual reverence**. (pg. 16)

Hospitality teaches us to offer an open heart, a stance of availability, and to look for God lurking in every single person who comes through the door. (pg.18)

Hospitality is the answer to hostility. Jesus said to love your neighbor; hospitality is how. (pg.23)

Acceptance [of another] is about receiving, rather than judging... Acceptance is not about condoning; it is about embracing. When we accept, we take an open stance to the other person. It is more than mere pious tolerance. **We stand in the same space and we appreciate who they are, right now at this moment, and affirm the Sacred in them**. (pg. 27)

In genuine hospitality we work to make our entire existence a welcoming table, a place prepared for others to be at ease, to receive from us comfort and strength.

Focus on opening your heart...look inside and see if you can find an empty space where you can let someone in. (pg 59)

Speaking of which, God is sometimes referred to as "wholly Other". If that's the case, then how are you and I, individually and us as a congregation, opening up a space in our heart for God? Since I believe God is already in there, then perhaps that means uncovering and unburying that Sacred Presence – and perhaps helping others unbury that Presence in their hearts.

So the question I would like for you to ponder this week is this: **How are you creating space in your own heart, and how are we as a congregation creating space in our corporate heart, for others?**

The spiritual life and authentic community involve more than prayer and works of justice, it also requires genuine – radical – hospitality. Let us be a congregation known for its radical hospitality!

Amen.

Matt Johnson works at the Apprentice Institute, which according to their website, "provides educational experiences in the area of Christian spirituality, develops resources for individual and church renewal, and engages in research to advance the field of Christian formation." Most of their work is based upon the Apprentice Series of books, written by James Bryan Smith.