

Baccalaureate Sermon – Dr. E. LeBron Fairbanks
May 24, 2002

MAKING ROOM...

Romans 12:9-12 (v12...given for hospitality)
Hebrews 13:1-3 (v2...entertaining angels unawares)
I Peter 4:8-10 (v9...practice hospitality)
Matthew 25:34-40 (v40...as you have done it unto the least of these)

Introduction:

1. During this past Christmas season Anne and I spent a fascinating evening in Columbus with a former MVNC student and his girlfriend.
 - a. We walked to a nearby restaurant to purchase some Chinese food.
 - b. We ate the meal by candlelight while sitting on the floor in a circle.
 - c. The meal was great. The two-three hour discussion was phenomenal.
 - d. And what a great blessing to Anne and me as well as to the other couple!
 - e. Sharing our meal. Sharing our time. Sharing our journey. During the evening Anne and I experienced what the Bible refers to as hospitality.
2. This practice of hospitality was a way of life fundamental to Christian identity for seventeen hundred years of the Christian church. Christine Pohl convincingly documents this practice in her book, “Making Room: Recovering Hospitality in Christian Tradition.”
3. In this final worship service before the 2002 Commencement service, I want to challenge you to embrace the rich concept of biblical hospitality. It has the potential of transforming relationships with those individuals with whom we live and work.
4. Since my sabbatical two and one-half years ago, I have wrestled with the biblical and historic understanding of hospitality in the Christian tradition including its pain, limitations and the leadership implications of spiritual hospitality. Time doesn’t allow me to deal with these implications today. I simply want to address the fundamental concept of spiritual hospitality.
 - a. Biblically and theologically, the term “hospitality” is not limited to receiving a stranger into our homes – although it surely includes this dimension.
 - b. Fundamentally, it is a core attitude toward others, which can be expressed by a great variety of behaviors. Hospitality, biblically understood, challenges us to relate to others as if we were relating to Christ Himself.
 - c. “Hospitality” means primarily the “creation of free space” – making room, to use Pohl’s words – in the midst of differences of thought or behavior that may exist.
5. With this perspective, the attitude of hospitality helps us to make room or create space for those with whom we live and work. The strange and the stranger can enter and become a friend. It is being to others with whom you live and work, a “living witness of the risen Christ.”
- d. The gift of Christian hospitality is the opportunity we provide for the guest, the stranger, or the friend to find his or her own way, even in the context of differences of thought or behavior.

- a. It often provides the opportunity for those individuals to enter into deeper contact with himself, or herself, with others, and with God.
- b. The result is often a healing relationship and the creation of a faith community .
- c. Hospitality, Christianly extended, seeks to offer friendship without binding the other, unity without artificiality, freedom without leaving the person alone, faith without cajoling or demeaning, and respect for individual differences.

7. The passages of scripture read earlier in this service challenge us to practice hospitality and to be hospitable.

- a. In so doing, we often serve “angels of God” without even knowing it.
- b. It is an art that more Christians need to cultivate.

Let me share with you two insights into this fascinating challenge of “spiritual hospitality.”

I. First, the gift of “spiritual hospitality” is a “love gift” to Christ.

A. Colossians 3:17, 23-24 reminds us that our service to others is service to the Lord Christ.

- 1. In our efforts we can be hurt, misunderstood, and rejected or we can be appreciated, affirmed, and accepted. The response, however, doesn’t dictate our action. We love because He first loved us.
- 2. Illustration: When Anne and I moved to Manila, The Philippines, both of us were overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of poverty in the country. The average per capita income was \$700 per year! Anne shared her despair with a Filipina friend, a female dentist. Anne’s friend encouraged her to focus on the few she could help, not on the masses she could not help. Anne took her advice and focused on some women in need around us. She bought glasses for one lady, new teeth for another, and for another she sponsored a beauticians course and attended the graduation ceremony. Anne befriended these ladies and invited them often to our home. In serving those ladies, Anne was serving Christ.

B. “The mystery of hospitality is how often our small tasks are translated by grace into God’s great work.”

- 1. Service to others through hospitality, biblically understood, is service to Christ.
- 2. Remember the concluding words from Matthew 25 read earlier in the service.

The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

C. Our gifts of hospitality to others are not selective “spiritual gifts” given by God to only a few for use in the kingdom.

- 1. Rather, our gifts of care and concern to others are practical expressions of our love for Christ.
- 2. For sure, with the commitment to a lifestyle of “spiritual hospitality” comes key questions to each of us:
 - a. What can I do to be hospitable?

- b. How will my attitude of hospitality impact the way I live, learn, and work?
- c. How do I deal with my unfinished agenda for the day when I attempt to “create space” and make room for others and in so doing not accomplish what I think needs to get done?
- 3. These are real life questions with which we must grapple. “Spiritual hospitality” takes time, patience and understanding.
- D. Henri Nouwen begins an article on compassion with an old sufi story of a “watermelon hunter.”

Once upon a time, there was a man who strayed from his own country into the world known as the Land of Fools. He soon saw a number of people fleeing in terror from a field where they had been trying to reap wheat. “There is a monster in that field,” they told him. He looked and saw that it was a watermelon.

He offered to kill the “monster” for them. When he had cut the melon from its stalk, he took a slice and began to eat it. To his amazement, the people became even more terrified of him than they had been of the melon. They drove him away with pitchforks crying, “He will kill us next, unless we get rid of him.”

It so happened that at another time another man also strayed into the Land of Fools, and the same thing started to happen to him. But, instead of offering to help them with the “monster,” he agreed with them that it must be dangerous and by tiptoeing away from it with them he gained their confidence. He spent a long time with them in their houses until he could teach them, little by little, the basic facts which would enable them not only to lose their fear of melons, but even to cultivate them themselves. [Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 207ff., quoted by Sheldon B. Kopp, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1972), p.8.]

- E. With which “hunter” do you most identify? By solidarity with the people, trying to understand their concerns and spending quality time with them, the second “hunter” made a profound difference in the lives of the people in the story. He “made room” and “created space” for these people who were different from him.
 - 1. Remember, we serve Christ through “practicing hospitality.”
 - 2. In so doing, we assist others in their growth and maturity in Christ.
 - 3. Again, the gift of spiritual hospitality is a love gift to Christ.
- II. Secondly, the “gift of spiritual hospitality” is a love gift from Christ.
 - A. The miracle of miracles is that we are blessed when we reach out to others.
 - 1. Christ turns our “gifts of hospitality” to others into “gifts” from Him to us.
 - 2. We find our Lord in the midst of our service to others.
 - 3. How often we experience God’s abiding presence in the midst of our very ordinary expressions of “making room and creating space for those with whom we live and work.”

- B. Nouwen would define Anne's compassionate actions to the Filipino ladies as "spiritual hospitality" – "being to others what St. John was for his listeners and readers: A living witness of the risen Christ!" A blessing to others perhaps; a "divine yes," for sure, to us!
1. Something happens to us and in us as we reach out to others with gifts of hospitality.
 2. What a miracle of God's mercy. His grace flows to us and through us when we work, play and study with "the mind of Christ!"
- C.. Our tendency, however, is to hesitate because we feel our "gifts" are so insignificant.
1. Brennon Manning told us a story several years ago in a chapel service about "The Cracked Pot."

A water-bearer in India had two large pots. Each hung on opposite ends of a pole that he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other was perfect. The latter always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house. The cracked pot arrived only half-full. Every day for a full two years, the water-bearer delivered only one and a half pots of water.

The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, because it fulfilled magnificently the purpose for which it had been made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection, miserable that it was to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After the second year of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, the unhappy pot spoke to the water-bearer one day by the stream.

"I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you," the pot said.

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all this work and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The water-bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the cracked pot took notice of the beautiful wildflowers on the side of the path, bright in the sun's glow, and the sight cheered it up a bit.

But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad that it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, not on the other pot’s side? That is because I have always known about your flaw, and I have taken advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day, as we have walked back from the stream you have watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master’s table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have had this beauty to grace his house.”

2. In our efforts at spiritual hospitality, do we sometimes feel like the “cracked pot?” Yes! Yes! Yes! But, God has a way of using our availability and our efforts toward others in ways we could never imagine. And in the process, He blesses us in ways we never dreamed possible!
- D. Again, the gift of hospitality – this gift of creating space and making room for others – by grace alone, becomes a love gift from Christ to us.
 1. We grow and mature in our faith as we increasingly “practice hospitality.”
 2. Remember, the miracle of miracles is that we are blessed when we reach out to others in Jesus’ name.

In conclusion let me remind you that:

1. Fundamentally, hospitality in Christian perspective is much more than being nice and feeding friends.
 - a. It is a way of life for believers and dictates how we approach those with whom we live, work, and serve.
 - b. For the strangers, the disenfranchised and lonely, our family members and friends, creating space and making room for them – this is the essence of hospitality, biblically understood.
 - c. Yet, we experience the “surprises of God” in our lives in the process of enabling others to grow and mature.
 - d. Through “providing space” and “making room” for others to grow, we are given “space” by God to grow and mature in Christlikeness.
2. Hospitality, biblically understood is nothing less than the amazing grace of God working in us and through us!
 - a. Let’s pursue this nearly forgotten practice in Christian tradition.
 - b. Join me in seeking to discover the rich implications of “spiritual hospitality,” especially as it relates to those with whom we work (or will work!).
 - c. Determine, as you leave your alma mater, to increasingly live out the MVNC motto, “To seek to learn is to seek to serve,” through practicing hospitality, biblically understood.

May it be so, Lord!