

**“HOSPITALITY: A CHRISTIAN VIRTUE”**  
**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close – Grace Church – July 18, 2004**

There is a story of a church much like ours that had a strange visitor one day. A scruffy looking young man entered the Church just as the service began. He was unkempt, long hair and needed a shave. He wore blue jeans and a denim shirt. The young man strode down the center aisle and plopped himself in the middle of it on the floor, just at the chancel steps.

A murmur ran through the congregation. Who did this young man think he was? How dare he! Who would tell him to move, or better yet, leave? The ushers failed to act. The priest stood at the pulpit, silent, a smile on his face. Then it happened. Old lady Smith got up from her back pew and began to make her way forward. Mrs. Smith was a pillar of the Church. A former warden, treasurer, head of the Altar Guild and Women’s Group, she was a force not to be messed with! She hobbled towards the young man with her cane making a clanking noise on the floor as she moved up.

Many a person had experienced her forthright way. Many a person had wilted under her gaze and talk. Mrs. Smith got closer to the boy on the floor. The tension was thick in the air. Then, it happened ... Mrs. Smith laid her cane on the floor ... and knelt down next to the young man. She smiled at him and put her arm around him. Now that’s hospitality!

The lessons these past few weeks have sought to focus us on what it means to be a Christian disciple. Last week we learned to follow Jesus means to be one who serves others, especially a stranger. This week, we learn about hospitality. Hospitality ... it is a virtue that is often neglected and often underestimated (according to William Willimon at Duke). It means exposing ourselves to welcome others.

The question for us this morning makes me think of the red, white and blue Episcopal Church sign in most towns. It reads, “The Episcopal Church welcomes you.” But do we really mean it? Do we welcome others? Hospitality speaks about welcoming others. It also hints at something deeper ... are we willing to welcome and receive Jesus himself? Do we understand that when we welcome others, we may be entertaining angels, or even Christ himself?

Scripture today focuses our attention on hospitality. First, we have the very familiar story of Abraham and Sarah. They are advanced in years. The promise of a son to them has still not been fulfilled. One day, three men appear, and we hear Abraham jumps to entertain the strangers. We know that they are angels, the presence of God come into Abraham and Sarah’s life. But something more is going on here at first. The duty of hospitality.

Life in Palestine was difficult. The land was largely wilderness and desert. A stranger could easily perish in this environment. Abraham was obligated to provide for anyone who came into his sphere. It was a matter of life and death. If someone did not get food, water or shelter in this place, it could prove fatal. But these three men are angels. They come to Abraham and Sarah with the annunciation of Isaac’s birth. It’s humorous to see Sarah’s reaction! She is an old woman, how can this be? But we are reminded that

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anything is possible with God! Sarah laughs, but a child will come to laugh in her tent! Isaac’s very name means “God laughs!”

I know a little bit what Abraham and Sarah are experiencing. Today is my son Sean’s 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. His sister, Jennifer, was born 8 years before him. We were happy to have her come into Diane and my life. But we wanted another child. I would have liked to have a son. But there was the miscarriage, the ectopic pregnancy, the testing ... and finally the doctors telling us that we would be parents of an only child.

We accepted the results. We were thankful for what we had been given, a child, a daughter. We trusted God. We believed that this was to be our journey. As a matter of fact, she was becoming quite “human” ... eight year olds are pretty easy to get along with! Then, God laughed! And along came Sean.

To open ourselves to God, to welcome others is to be transformed and changed. We experience something larger than ourselves. We come to see the hand of God at work in our lives. We might even experience a revelation in the midst of a ministry of hospitality. We never know who we might be entertaining.

Now we come to the story of Mary and Martha. This too is a story about hospitality. It’s risky for the women to entertain Jesus. Remember, women had no status in Jesus’ day. But Jesus broke the conventions of his day. He related to people who others did not reach out to. Into their house comes Jesus. He teaches, he criticizes, he reveals! When we invite Jesus into our lives, we have to be prepared for the unexpected!

For us, it is a risk to take a stranger into our lives. He requires great faith. It means we have to expose ourselves. Some things will be beyond our control. Why don’t we offer more hospitality? The biggest reason is fear. We are afraid to let others see how we live, who we are. People will look into our bathrooms and kitchens. They will see things that we would much rather keep private. We are very selective about who we will let in. We don’t want to “let it all hang out.”

Too many churches have forgotten about the ministry of hospitality. We want limits on membership. We only want people who look like us, act like us, vote like us, think like us. We exclude and shun those who might threaten or challenge us. We don’t live in the sign outside the Church. We only welcome a select few into our midst. One church I served disliked how I permitted “those” people come into Church. What they meant were people who lived in the next town over. We are afraid of others. We don’t welcome easily.

But Christian hospitality demands that we make room for others. It is a matter of life and death, for them ... and for us! To make room for others is to make room for God. If we are to grow in faith, we must be willing to enlarge the community! There can be no exclusions. Jesus never turned anyone away who sought him, why do we dare to do it ourselves?

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Jesus should make us nervous. He is unpredictable and challenges us when we meet. That’s what happened to Martha. She had one way of working it out. Jesus showed her another way. You see, what Mary did was radical. She sat at Jesus’ feet like a disciple. This was unheard of in Jesus’ day. Only men could be followers. For Jesus to permit Mary to sit and listen was radical. For Mary to sit and listen was unimaginable. Martha’s hospitality leads us to a new place, a new way of being!

Hospitality requires us to commit an act of love. It’s about being and doing. When we welcome others, we are welcoming Jesus. Hospitality has long been a passion for me ... just ask my wife. I have brought a number of people home over the years. One year we took in a teenage girl from Aruba. Went from parents of a toddler to one of a teenager. That was a shock! Another fellow stayed with us and is now a Roman Catholic priest. We have taken in a mother and daughter, and others. Each time we have come away with a deep sense of peace and blessing.

About a month ago, I came across a man sleeping in our alcove. His name was Bill. He dressed in a suit and carried his clothes in suitcase on wheels. He was a computer whiz, but had some mental problems. Bill seemed sick to me. I tried to help and ended up letting him sleep on the third floor of the parish hall for several nights. I didn’t share this with anyone in the parish. I knew some people would disapprove. Bill was sick with bronchitis. I gave him a place indoors to sleep. It was an act of hospitality. It didn’t cost me anything, except some time and effort. I just got an e-mail from bill and he’s found a place to live in Coatesville.

Jesus calls us to open ourselves to others and to make room for those in need. We never know when we might be entertaining angels unawares. Hospitality might be a matter of life and death for the other person ... and us as well. It is one of the ways we are called to be disciples of Jesus.

I would like to close with a story I got from William Willimon’s commentary for this week. A young man decided to spend his summer working in the inner city at a Jesuit run Church. The work was hard and the demands great. One particular day, he and an old Jesuit priest responded to the needs of people all day. The crowds seemed like they would never end. Finally, late in the evening, the people finally were helped. The young man and old priest went to the big, heavy oak doors and started to close them. As they gazed out into the dark street, they saw a man shuffling slowly towards them. The young man, weary with fatigue, looked in dismay at the stranger approaching. He mumbled in a low voice, “Jesus Christ ...” The old Jesuit responded, “Could be... could be. We better let him in and help him.”