Radical Hospitality: A Sermon
Arthur Van Seters

Of course, being hospitable in welcoming family, friends and others into our homes is an unqualified good. Indeed, some cultures lay a great deal of importance on being hospitable to the sudden appearance of someone in their home or village. One thinks of Greg Mortenson who became lost in the rugged mountains of Pakistan. There he stumbled into a remote village that had never seen a Caucasian before. But they took him in because for them that was an absolute duty. In his remarkable book, Three Cups of Tea, Mortenson reflected on an ancient Bali proverb: *The first time you share a cup of tea with a Bali, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honoured guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you are family.*

There are other ways in which hospitality can be expressed. In his book *Civility*, Yale University Law Professor Stephen Carter writes about his childhood. His father was a black lawyer who decided that the family would move into one of the northern “white” suburbs of Washington, D.C. When the movers left, the day was still warm and the three Carter children were sitting on the front steps looking out at their new neighbourhood. Time and again they would notice cars slowing down to look at them fleetingly and drive on, giving the impression that this was not where they belonged. Increasingly they felt uncomfortable and longed to be back in their old black neighbourhood. Just as they were sliding toward despondency, they heard a loud voice from across the street: “Welcome, welcome, welcome!”

It was their neighbour, Sara.
Kestenbaum, who had just come home from work. She dashed into her house and in no time emerged with a tray of cold drinks and a plateful of home-baked cookies. She came across the street and introduced herself, welcoming them again to the neighbourhood. Leaving the tray with the children, she proceeded to meet their parents. It was a moment that Stephen Carter would never forget, a marvellous example, he says, of civility. It was also an example of hospitality.

A very different experience has emerged in recent times in Paris. It is called Tableau Blanc (white table), because everyone is expected to come to a sort of public dinner dressed in white. An anonymous email invitation announces a date, with a follow-up on the day before the event giving the specific location. Over the past four years this has become so popular that now some three thousand people attend. The only things supplied are tables, cloths and chairs. Participants bring their own food, plates, cutlery and a candle and are expected to clean up thoroughly afterwards. The food you bring is put in front of you and then, as the meal begins, it is passed around to the dozen or so strangers at the table. This civic sharing of food and conversation builds an intriguing community.

In the movie The Terminal, Tom Hanks plays the role of Viktor Navorski, who is unable to fly out of New York because a revolution has broken out in his home country of Krakozhia. He is forced to remain within the terminal for nine months. He is disposed to treat everyone with great respect. He learns people’s names, makes friends, rescues a stranger and eventually builds a more caring community among ordinary workers in the airport. Viktor doesn’t think of himself as special or heroic. He is just a deeply compassionate person who manifests a lively care for others.

In the early 1990s, I was part of a seminary delegation visiting Sao Paulo, Brazil. This included a conversation with the remarkable educator Paulo Freire, who was Minister of Education for that city of 16 million people. We had just begun our conversation when from a side door a young woman came in with a tray of demitasses of coffee. She began by serving Freire, who immediately stopped talking with us and engaged in a lively informal conversation with the server. He then explained to us that he did this because he wanted to express to them his appreciation for their service and also because he is vitally interested in their lives. He adds that they too are God’s children every bit as much as anyone else who comes into his office.

But what is “radical hospitality” and where might we find it?

These are all good and wholesome expressions of hospitable openness to others. They foster civility and deepen a human sense of connectedness. They renew us personally and strengthen just and compassionate communities. While some of them may appear to be unusual, they would not likely be classified as radical.

In fact, the phrase “radical hospitality” feels a bit like an oxymoron. However, “radical” here does not mean reckless or outrageous but deep-rooted. Radical hospitality comes from the very depths of our humanness when we understand ourselves and others to be created in the image of God. Radical hospitality is fundamentally something theological. It acts beyond social calculation or cultural tradition because, in the final analysis, it is shaped by grace.

The theological character of hospitality is made transparent in the Parable of the Last Judgment, in Matthew 25:31-40. As the multitudes of humankind are amassed for final judgment, they are divided into two groups, with the “sheep” on the right and the “goats” on the left. They are asked only one question: Did you show me hospitality? That this is the only question asked puts the theme of hospitality at the heart and centre of the gospel. Those on the judge’s right (“the righteous”) are welcomed into the kingdom because, as the judge tells them, when the Son of Man was in need, you responded. You gave food or a drink when he was hungry or thirsty. When he was a stranger, you welcomed him. You clothed him when he was naked and visited him when he was in prison. Hearing this litany of actions, the “righteous” are bewildered. They ask, “When did we see you in this or that condition
and respond?” The answer: “When you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”

Now, it is important to note that “the righteous” in this parable were surprised. The acts of hospitality were so profoundly natural to them as followers of Jesus that they didn't classify them as special or unusual. The gospel of God’s grace was woven into the very fabric of their lives. They were so infused with the Spirit of Christ that, like the early church, they poured out their love with abandon.

In Acts 2:43-47, as a result of Pentecost, many new believers emerge and are described as having all things in common and distributing to all according to need. They are further characterized as having generous hearts and showing goodwill to everyone. Radical hospitality is a profoundly spiritual impulse.

Jesus himself, of course, was constantly open to the needs of all kinds of people. The gospels tell of his engagement with people facing special challenges: those who were blind or deaf, people ostracized because of leprosy and those whose lives were demonically possessed. He reached out to them without hesitation. In Matthew 11:2-5, the disciples of John the Baptist want to know if Jesus is really the Messiah. He responds by referring to the healing of various persons and the proclamation of good news to those who are poor. This was his way of living right up to his death on the cross, when he turned to one of those crucified next to him and welcomed him into the fellowship of God’s ultimate kingdom (Luke 24:42-43).

Jesus was keenly aware of the long trajectory of hospitality in the Hebrew scriptures. In Luke 4:14-30, he preaches a sermon on Isaiah 61:1-2. He illustrates this prophetic passage with two remarkable acts of hospitality to outsiders (the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian general). Prophetic generosity apparently knows no bounds. One is reminded of Ezekiel’s admonition to the Jews returning from their long exile in Babylonia. They were about to reapportion their land according to ancient tribal allotments. But the prophet requires that they do much more.
You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 47:22-23)

Such deep-rooted expressions of hospitality were and still are regarded as controversial. The congregation listening to Jesus drove him out of town and were prepared to throw him off a cliff. Contemporary encouragements for Jews and Palestinians to share Israel-Palestine as equals are thought by many to be similarly outrageous. This only underscores the difference between a theological approach to hospitality and a merely social, cultural or political one.

There are, however, clear examples today of the kind of hospitality that Jesus was pointing to. A number of years ago, YoungMe Yi, a student at Knox College, told the story of Korean Pastor Yang-Won Son. When Japan invaded Korea, two of his sons were murdered by a Japanese police officer because they refused to worship the Emperor. Pastor Son reached out to that officer with the gospel and eventually adopted him as his own son. That same man no longer worshipped the Emperor but became a Christian pastor.

The township of Gugulethu in South Africa is a place of crowded houses and minimal services, like running water. Desmond Tutu tells of a visit his pastor daughter, Mpho Tutu, made there to the home of Mrs. Maphosela. She had taken in children whose parents had died from AIDS. It all began when a dying mother asked her to care for her child. This was followed by another and another. Her tiny three-room house became home to 20 children from the ages eight months to 18 years. Some of the children were infected with HIV. She received some assistance from neighbourhood women and the older children helped with the chores. Mysteriously she scraped together enough finances to feed her new family, but most of all she gave each child the affection they so desperately needed. She and others like her do this because, says Tutu, they are living out of the goodness gifted to them. They see themselves and others created in the image of God. They are, he adds, living the eucharist,

that supreme symbol of God’s self-giving love.

During the early part of the Second World War, a Jewish child by the name of Pierre Savage was born in the town of Le Chambon sur Lignon in southern France. The five thousand people of this town and the surrounding area (mostly Huguenot descendants) gave sanctuary to an equal number of Jews fleeing the Nazi army. The resistance of the Le Chambon community was spectacularly successful. Even when some of the villagers lost their lives protecting their newcomers, the rest of the people refused to reveal where they had hidden them. Many years later, Pierre Savage made a documentary of this remarkable rescue, entitled *Weapons of the Spirit*.

When Savage interviewed the people of Le Chambon as to why they risked so much to save his family and so many others, he was surprised by the puzzled expression on their faces. They honestly did not regard what they had done as particularly heroic or even noteworthy. They told him that they simply responded to people who needed help. To them it was just “a normal thing to do.” Their discipleship as followers of Jesus echoes the characterization of the righteous in the Parable of the Last Judgment.

**The challenge for the church**

The true character of the church is revealed through the way in which it exercises hospitality. When it is reluctant, calculating or measured, it points to an insular community. When it worries about its dwindling numbers and tries to increase its attractiveness to outsiders through welcoming strategies, it is still turned inward by self-interest.

When, however, the church truly grasps what it means to be a company of the Spirit of Jesus called to share the grace and love of Christ, there are no limits to its welcome, and the radical hospitality of grace becomes a given.

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