

## Be My Guest

As we approach the holiday season I thought maybe I could talk about hospitality. Many of us will either be a guest or invite guests into our homes and sanctuaries during this season. So how does that process of guests and hosting really unfold and how might it be related to spirituality? After 10 days on the road in guest rooms and airports, I have a slightly different perspective I didn't have months ago when I picked this title. So let's begin with the definition of "hospitality".

The online dictionary says it is "the friendly and generous reception of guests, visitors or strangers." Synonyms are kindness, welcome and generosity. It is interesting that the definition orders the recipients of hospitality by familiarity: guests we have intended to be there, visitors we might not have invited but maybe are not too upset about and then **strangers**. Perhaps the most telling test of our hospitality skills relates to people we don't know and at least initially, have no connection to. Yet our hospitality to visitors and strangers provides what I would say is the first gift of hospitality—connection.

We just finished our fall series on loving everybody always. We repeatedly acknowledged that the only commandment Jesus gave us was to love one another. All of the others! The first step of love is to connect. One of my favorite breakfast spots in Kansas City is usually pretty busy and mostly seats people at tables for 2 to 6. Last Saturday I noticed the addition of a long table up front, labeled the "Community Table". The sign says, "Sit down as strangers and leave as friends". What a wonderful concept. In my epic trip home through 4 airports I had several opportunities to watch community building among strangers. Not everyone participates but there were sweet acts of random kindness and lots of connections made as you wait together, traipse across gate changes and cancelled flights. I discovered that my peaceful presence was a generous gift to a couple young staff who were lamenting the verbal beatings they were taking due to weather disruptions totally outside their job descriptions. I learned about the connecting points in the lives of strangers as we participated in airport hospitality—as we made connections in love. The simple, uncomplicated agape love Jesus taught. As we gather downstairs today, I hope we can make connections with newcomers and visitors as well as the familiar faces we consider our guests. I hope the hospitality of sharing food creates new openings for the welcome of Unity of Lehigh Valley to reach out and touch lives as strangers become guests, feeling connected and loved in this community.

Which brings me to what I consider the second gift of hospitality, transformation of both host and guest. When we open our hearts and minds to others, we invite in the potential of transformation. Perhaps no story in the bible describes this better than the story of Zacchaeus. The youth looked at this story recently from the standpoint of being grateful for our bodies, just as they are. Zacchaeus was the only person in the bible described as “short statured”. He was also a dishonest tax collector who had cheated the people around him for years and did not have a very nice reputation. So when Jesus comes to town, did he choose to have dinner with the priests? With the nicest people the disciples could find? That’s not how Jesus rolled. Nope. He finds Zacchaeus up in a tree, trying to see Jesus in the crowd and says, “Hey Zacchaeus, let’s have dinner.” You know Unity looks at the deeper meaning to stories and the efforts of Zacchaeus climbing a tree metaphysically represent an openness and willingness to engage the Christ of our being. Zacchaeus was transformed during that dinner. He acknowledged the error of his ways and sought not only to change his behavior but to make restitution to those he had harmed. The transformation is our work but it is interesting to note how hospitality opens the door of our hearts and minds to something new unfolding.

When you think of hospitality, do you only think of community with those familiar? How much transformation usually happens when we stay in our familiar ruts? Ummm, not much. On the other hand, how much transformation is possible when we engage in connection with strangers who think differently, look differently or have different customs? In the words of St. Francis, do we only seek to be understood by others or do we seek to understand others? The shift to *understanding* others is where transformation is possible. Transformation might look like letting go of old beliefs and assumptions, about ourselves and others. Transformation might look like discovering sacred ground and common ground between us where we thought that could not exist. In our “Braving the Wilderness” series a couple years ago, Brené Brown advised us that people are harder to hate up close so we have to move closer, hold hands with strangers. In a polarized world, it is engaging in shared activities with those we view as the other end of the thought spectrum. Hanging out with those who believe exactly like we do is comfortable but not as likely to be transformational.

Perhaps one transformation that would be helpful right now, living in our polarized and often contentious world, would be to let go of assumptions.

“What if” is one way I coax my stubborn ego belief system into softening and opening to change. Maybe Zacchaeus was up in that tree thinking, “What if I could sit down with this Jesus guy and see what he’s up to.” “What if” the assumptions I make about others because of their appearance or language or politics wasn’t what I thought. With practice, I’ve coaxed myself into assuming that my assumptions are off; so recently I just discard them when I notice them coming up.

At the hotel in Detroit Thursday night I went down to the lobby to use the computer to try to figure out what my flight schedule for hopefully getting home on Friday. There were three computers and an Asian couple sat at two of them. There were only two chairs. They weren’t actually using the computers but chatting animatedly in video conversation in another language. I quietly went to the empty computer without a chair at the far end. The gentleman finished up first. He looked down to where I was and said, in perfect English, “Do you need a chair?” “Well, this computer isn’t really working” I responded. He moved over to a cushioned chair, offering me his chair and the computer. The computer was giving me a message that I couldn’t access the Delta site and the gentleman’s wife now noticed that his desk chair was much lower than hers. So she offered me her chair and computer. They were stranded trying to get to Tokyo, after being delayed getting out of Baltimore. I offered that I didn’t feel so bad about just getting to Allentown when they were trying to get to Tokyo. I ended up figuring out my schedule AND finding sacred connection with a couple from Japan. We wished each other luck on the journey. I had to let go of the potential assumption that language and culture might be a barrier to our making any sort of connection. With kindness and generosity we offered each other hospitality in the unfamiliar setting of a hotel lobby. Time and time again on this trip I observed my assumptions being thrown out the windows as unexpected kindness kept appearing. An older woman struggled to get her suitcase in the overhead bin before sitting down a few seats down. When we landed a gentleman in business attire near the bin opened it and set her suitcase down next to her. The woman was already steeled for the struggle and was totally caught off-guard. “But, but how did you know?” she stammered. She did not seem accustomed to kindness. The guy just shrugged and smiled. She turned and braced herself to drag the suitcase down the aisle and off the plane. Our hospitality offers us the gift of transformation as soon as we become willing and open.

The last gift of hospitality that I want to explore also requires a shift in us but the gift is a world that works for all. The shift is away from giving what we want or what is familiar to giving what is needed in the world. In offering hospitality, often we are willing to give guests what we want to give without ever asking or considering what the guests need. We are more focused on creating a world that works for me rather than a world that works for all. Some of our sanctuary chairs are a bit frayed so imagine if someone offered to replace our chairs. Now imagine that all the chairs were the height of elementary student chairs. Works for me! But is that what is needed in our sanctuary?

Luke tells the story of the hospitality of Mary and Martha when Jesus comes to visit. Martha is rushing around cleaning and fussing—because that’s what she does. Mary sits down to listen because Jesus has come to teach and share in their home and she discerns that what is needed is quiet receptivity. Martha then proceeds to whine because Mary isn’t working and doing what she’s doing. Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, Martha”—you didn’t know that came from the bible did you? “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is **need** of only one thing. Mary has **chosen** the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” Mary has discerned what is needed, and that is a better choice. I think we get confused in Unity sometimes with this story believing Jesus is saying Mary is the better *person* because she is reflective rather than a busy doer. Really I think the message is to discern what is needed and choose what is needed rather than what is our habit. Sometimes what is needed is action and sometimes what is needed is reflection. Hospitality in our world may be simplified to “be kind” so long as we understand that what **we** believe is kind may not be received as kindness. What is kind is to tune in and ask others what feels kind and supportive and choose to give what is needed rather than just what we want to give.

A very simple example is hugging. If a person is feeling isolated and alone and longs for human touch, a hug is a kind gesture. If a person is feeling isolated and alone and unexpected hugs trigger fear and discomfort, a hug is not a kind gesture—but a handshake or being invited downstairs for coffee might feel very kind. If I am a hugger and do not stop to discern and ask what is needed, I am not giving the hospitality of kindness. I am just Martha fretting about in my own world of habit. On the other hand, if I am introverted and neither offer a hug nor an invitation downstairs, I am also not giving the hospitality of kindness but just living in my Martha habits.

Without discerning what is needed, I bumble about creating a world that works for me--content that it will work for people like me and not caring about others.

Caring about others seems to be the crux of the idea of hospitality. When we take time to care about others, whether we know them or not, the Universe gives us the gifts of connection, transformation and a world that works for all. That seems like a pretty generous exchange to me. Surely we can pause and care about others even in this busy season. This holiday season I invite you to offer to friends, family, visitors and strangers “Be My Guest” and be open to the gifts the Universe bestows when we care.