

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 7, 2025
9:30 AM

Texts: Genesis 18:1-10a & John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Theme: The Art of Hospitality: Biblical Hospitality

[prayer]

*The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.*

*Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.*

*No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone puts on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.*

*I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.*

That was “Red Brocade,” a poem by Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye.¹ It captures something of the essence of hospitality shared in both of today’s scripture lessons – the spiritual discipline of turning away from ourselves – our time, our comfort, our to-do list – and turning instead toward another person to make them feel seen, welcome, and cared for. Biblical hospitality asks: Can you be fully present and attentive to the person in front of you?

I imagine Abraham had plenty of other things to do than entertain three strangers at lunch. And while we have the luxury of knowing these strangers were God Almighty and two destroying angels on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah, in the shimmering desert heat Abraham saw only three, dusty travelers. However anxious he felt about the demands of *his* to-do list, he was even more anxious to show honor to these unexpected guests. He was practically tripping over himself to make them comfortable. And the reward for his hospitality was the good news that he and his wife Sarah, long childless, would at last have a son.

The writer of Hebrews said, “Do not neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it” (13:2 CEB). [aside about Rubylov painting] Abraham intuitively understood this. His hospitality stood in marked contrast to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who, in the very next chapter, sealed their terrible fate by failing to hospitably receive God’s messengers. For this sin God destroyed the city and almost all its inhabitants.

These days we are often afraid of strangers – strangers knocking on our doors, strangers living in homeless encampments on our streets, strangers crossing our southern border, the proverbial stranger in a van with candy waiting to snatch our children. We are afraid they will take something from us or do us violence. Is our fear sometimes justified? Yes. But it saddens me to think of all the good, even divine, news we miss out on when we live our lives in fear of each other rather than open to the grace of knowing and being known, serving and being served.

For the next three Sundays we will focus on “the art of hospitality” – what Scripture teaches us about becoming and being people of radical welcome. The Coeur Team has identified hospitality as one of our core values here at Community UMC. We have been drafting together a statement of welcome that

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/naomi-shihab-nye>

fleshes out our “All Are Welcome – All Means All” tagline. In doing so we had a little debate about that word “radical.” Some hear a word that conjures images of extreme behavior and beliefs. To be frank, that is kind of the point. Paul tells us to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10 NRSVUE). In other words, be extremely countercultural in how you welcome people.

The most extreme example of hospitality is Jesus himself. In the Gospel of John, we receive this countercultural story of Jesus kneeling to wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. Foot washing was a commonplace hospitality in the ancient world. Guests would arrive with dusty, dirty, sandaled feet and so the host would offer them a basin of water to clean and refresh themselves.

Normally foot washing was done by the guests themselves or by one of the host’s servants. Jesus breaks this mold. He is the host. But when he removes his clothing and wraps himself in a towel, he assumes the garb and posture of a servant. John uses the verb *tithēmi* to describe Jesus removing his clothes. This is the same verb Jesus uses when he describes laying down his life. Jesus is signifying the connection between his sacrificial gift of foot washing and the sacrificial gift of his life that he will shortly offer to the world.

It is important to emphasize that hospitality is a gift, a means of grace we offer to each other. Jesus is not obligated to do this service for his disciples. He is not obligated to do this service for us. He chooses to do it as an act of love:

“Though he existed in the form of God,
[he] did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:6-8 NRSVUE)

Peter (being Peter) objected to Jesus literally stooping to wash his feet. He felt this was below the dignity of his Lord and Master. Jesus responds that if Peter wants to

have a share in God's kingdom, then he will let Jesus wash his feet. Who here has participated in a foot washing – either had their feet washed or washed another person's? I can say from experience that if you are doing the washing it is a surprisingly intimate gesture to touch another person's feet, to gently bathe away the dirt and sweat and dead skin. And I can also say from experience that, because of that intimacy, it feels pretty vulnerable to allow someone to touch your feet in that way.

Jesus was telling Peter that participation in God's kingdom requires a degree of intimacy and vulnerability. By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus invites them into the same intimate relationship he shares with God the Father. Jesus is symbolically sharing the hospitality of his heavenly home by extending to the disciples the love the Father and the Son share with each other.

This intimacy makes Peter uncomfortable. It may make us uncomfortable, too. It overturns our assumptions about who is a servant and who deserves to be served. It prioritizes relationships over social convention.

Yet it is only by accepting Jesus as both our loving host *and* a servant who intimately cares for us that we can inherit a portion of God's kingdom. We receive the hospitality of God in Jesus Christ and then we are commanded to go and do likewise. "I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do" (John 13:15 CEB). Jesus has set the model of hospitality for us – not foot washing, necessarily, but the practice of receiving others with a servant's heart. But the only way we can know how to imitate the hospitality of Christ is to first receive Jesus's loving service for ourselves. Once we have experienced this hospitality and service, we are commanded to turn around and embody that service for others. When we do this, we reveal Jesus's identity to the world – the Son of God who came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28).

Our acts of love and hospitality unite us with Jesus just as he is united with the Father. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35 CEB). Keeping Jesus's command to love each other is the primary mark of a disciple and demonstrates that we are indeed abiding in Christ. Because the Church is the

Body of Christ on earth, we are the embodiment of Christ's hospitality in the world. Offering Christ-like hospitality is one of the fundamental spiritual practices of a Christian and a church that is being transformed in the image of Christ. Every church, and every Christian, is called to practice biblical hospitality.

What, then, constitutes biblical hospitality and how can we be a church that embodies biblical hospitality? We will explore that question more next Sunday, but both Abraham and Jesus's examples give us a good vision.

- Biblical hospitality is rooted in the love of others and particularly love of the stranger.
- Biblical hospitality is never too busy to be present to another person.
- Biblical hospitality is lavish in its generosity. It strives to create a culture of belonging where people feel like they are at home.
- Biblical hospitality takes the posture of a servant. It seeks to serve before it is served.
- Biblical hospitality sees radical welcome as a defining characteristic of God's kingdom.

In the early church, the Christian value of hospitality was most evident at the table of fellowship, the sacred meal that eventually evolved into our practice of communion. This table was open to all as a foretaste of the eschaton, of God's kingdom come to earth. This table was and is where the Church shares the bread and cup as a reminder that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we now have fellowship with God. God has given each of us an honored seat at His table in His household. Radical hospitality, then, is not a new-fangled idea; it is our heritage as followers of Jesus. As you approach the Table today, may you experience anew the hospitality of our Savior. May you savor the gift of this meal. And then may you go from this place and extend that same hospitality, that same sense of welcome and belonging, to your neighbor.

Let us pray: *Jesus, we give our lives to you in response to the gift of love and grace you have given to us. We admit that at times we are too comfortable and unwilling to change. What is required is scary. But today we say yes to becoming uncomfortable, accepting your command to love the stranger and welcome the stranger into our church home. Help us find ways to be your hands and feet, to*

begin practicing hospitality in all aspects of our lives, so that it flows naturally in all that we do, bearing witness to our love for you. Amen.²

² Adapted from a prayer by Debi Nixon in *The Art of Hospitality Companion Book: A Practical Guide for a Ministry of Radical Welcome*, revised edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2024), 27.