

“Taking Jesus Seriously” Matthew 10: 37-42

Context: Taking Jesus seriously can get you into trouble. Sharing the good news, the gospel, about Jesus—by practicing hospitality according to customs of the ancient Mediterranean world would make us good, educated, relatively wealthy Presbyterians uncomfortable if not downright angry. Opening our homes, exposing our families to strangers is way too radical!

Jesus is teaching and training his disciples to carry on his movement, mission of proclaiming and living the Kingdom of God—preaching, teaching, healing. As Jewish-Christians shared their new life in Christ with other Jews and even Gentiles, they experienced rejection, even hostility; if you showed hospitality to Christians you were disrespecting Torah—in other words, not obeying certain food and purity laws. Hospitality would mean you welcomed not only the Christian as a person but also Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus sent the early disciples and sends us, the 21st century church, and tells us we will receive power and authority for our work. He said travel light and move on when folks refuse to hear the good news. Jesus said the work will be hard—religious and political leaders, even your own families will turn on you.

How would define hospitality?... Perhaps a few images will help.

The first is Game Day on Bowman Field—the ESPN trucks roll in on Wednesday night and start setting up for Saturday. We welcome Game Day—college football in the South is religion—we all know that. Kirk Herbstreit likes Clemson and we worship the ESPN gods...and when your team is #1, it doesn’t get much better, unless maybe a total solar eclipse over Death Valley. The excitement, all the signs, students in

varying degrees of intoxication, the anticipation of Lee Corso predicting who the winner will be...bring it on-Southern hospitality at its best.

Now consider a second image—also on Bowman Field—a faith-filled Field of Dreams. Religious groups, instead of normally competing with each other for student attention, decide to come together to host an outdoor picnic. Bowman is covered in round tables borrowed from every campus ministry organization. Honored guests sitting around the tables are construction workers, university support staff, people from Clemson Community Care, fire and police, fast food employees. They are being served by area clergy and all the campus ministers. After lunch, they are given free tickets and escorted to the Florida State game by Dabo and the coaching staff.

A third image: PSA Sunday night meeting, big crowd of diverse students—Presbyterians, Baptists, Jewish, Muslim, AME Zion, Lutheran, Catholic, even a few Crew and FCA students who got lost and wandered down College Ave... along with African American, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, LGBTQ...they are sitting inside and outside on the deck, standing inside, even sitting on the grass with overflow chairs in the parking lot. Guest speaker is the new Latino-Hispanic Director for Clemson. Hospitality, inclusiveness, reconciliation, diversity...quite a night for new relationships!

Well, at least Game Day is reality TV! The other two are nice, hopeful fantasies, but what if we Christians could practice that kind of hospitality.

We live in the South—and even if you are a transplant from some foreign country like New Jersey, you have experienced Southern welcome, hospitality, politeness...“fine, I’m just fine, thanks, how you doin?” Now that I have gray hair and senior status, it’s fairly common

for me to hear in a restaurant, “Can I get you anything else, sweetheart?”

Hospitality for most of us white Westerners means we clean the house for company—dusting, the bathrooms, fresh towels, vacuuming, hiding clutter in the drawer—some of us even have welcome mats or a pineapple beside the front door. We are friendly, hospital folks; we practice social courtesy, entertaining. As one woman recently told me, “that’s just what we do.”

Matthew’s gospel takes us a bit deeper. To welcome apostles or missionaries or “paid Christians” like preachers, educators, and youth workers is to welcome Jesus, and to welcome Jesus is to welcome God. If you do, you get your second coming, end time reward, a blessing—your heavenly card is punched. That’s a pretty good reason to be nice to church staff!

When we read this text, the key word is “welcome.” But Bible scholars for years have been using the word “receive” rather than welcome. “Receive” is more than “how you’all doin?” It was used to describe the formal and respectful acceptance of a king’s ambassador. Receiving the king’s representative was yielding to his authority.

Jesus promised reward and blessing not to those who just welcomed his followers but to those who “received” them, who acknowledged them as Christ’s ambassadors and acted on their message and shared in their work. Jesus did not promise blessing for hospitality but for discipleship—people willing to serve him as Lord.

Many folks “welcomed” Jesus—Peter and his mother-in-law, the town of Gadarenes, a synagogue leader, his hometown peeps, Lazarus, Mary and Martha...but Zaccheus and Cornelius the centurion, not only welcomed Jesus and Peter respectively—their whole family became

disciples of Jesus. Likewise Lydia, the wealthy retailer of purple cloth, welcomed Paul AND received him as an ambassador of Christ.

But showing hospitality to strangers, angles unaware? I mean, really? That would feel uncomfortable, strange, what would the neighbors think? Could have social, economic, political consequences if you welcomed the wrong kind of folks—people who were different, didn't think and act like you and your neighborly tribe. For example, Fort Hill becoming a part of the church sanctuary movement for immigrants, refugees—sort of an extended Family Promise experience. When we learn to accept, welcome and include people on the margins of society, we are better prepared to accept the marginal in ourselves. As we nurture compassion and sympathy for the brokenness in others, we may find compassion and sympathy for the brokenness within ourselves. When we are willing to reach out to the wounds of others for whatever reason, both their hurts and pain, as well as our own, can be bandaged and healed.

We understand hospitality more as pleasant demeanor rather than essential responsibility. Opening ourselves, our homes and families to strangers because of our being followers of Jesus—well, for most of us, it's just not happening. As former Moderator of the General Assembly, John Fife, learned many years ago, providing food and water to Hispanics who are crossing the border illegally so they can find work to support their families back home can get you arrested and put in jail.

Practicing hospitality is important because our reception of the other is closely connected to our receptivity toward God and says a lot about our character and priorities. Genuine hospitality is a healthy, essential spiritual habit because openness to God requires the same giving of self. Hospitality to another is a concrete expression of our soul's openness to God. If we are not prepared to welcome the stranger it is

unlikely we can handle the radical discipleship that Jesus demands in Matthew 10. Those who claim love and loyalty to God without passing that love on to the stranger undermine their own confession. Likewise, hospitality to others without love for God, one quickly discovers humanity's ultimate need for grace.

Hospitality is one means of the Holy Spirit transforming us into the kind of people God has called us to be—the process of sanctification. It is intentional caring for the stranger, the neighbor, maybe even the enemy, without expecting anything in return. As Jesus says in Matthew, “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.”

The late Henri Nouwen, priest, professor, and devotional writer, says that when we have looked into the eyes of the poor, the oppressed, those folks on the margins, and paid attention to THEIR lifestyles, LISTENED to their observations and insights, we might have a glimpse of the hospitality that Jesus spoke about and called us to imitate. Christian hospitality helps folks like us to accept the fact that the poor are the authentic messengers of the good news.

While many of us will not be intentional about practicing hospitality among poor folks, maybe our definition of the stranger can be expanded to include young adults 25-35 years old—especially singles or young marrieds without kids—and also those young parents. This is the age group many of whom had some religious background but are no longer involved. They still believe in God, are eager to serve on mission trips, enjoy hanging out with friends at local bars or eateries, appreciate honest theological discussions but have no interest serving on church committees. There are good reasons they are not worshipping with us.

As our congregation SHIFTS from attractional to missional and makes forming disciples a priority, I invite us to consider our unique culture.

Culture functions like internal glue to bind members together and serves as an external boundary to clarify who's in and who's out. Culture provides a sense of identity as well as a sense of belonging.

You have probably read articles about pastors who dressed up as homeless people to test their congregation's inclusiveness. If someone doesn't look like they fit in, they might not be warmly welcomed or received. There is a difference between hospitality and inclusion, between welcomed and received. Most congregations, like Southern culture, are quick to welcome and slow to include.

Inclusion integrates newcomers into smaller groups, encourages them to share their gifts, talents and stories; their presence impacts the culture of the congregation. Inclusion and receiving is more than assimilation. We do not want people of different faith, race, income, sexual preference/identity to simply become check boxes. No congregation really grows without being both hospitable and inclusive.

I suspect most of us, me included, are better at welcome than receiving and including because receiving means being transformed and changed and treating strangers as neighbors. If hospitality to another, especially the stranger, is a concrete expression of our souls openness to God and crucial to our growing into the likeness of Christ, then I don't know about you, but I've got a lot of growing to do.