

Midweek Lent  
February 28, 2007

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### “Hospitality”

Tonight we are continuing our 2007 Lenten Worship Journey entitled “Living with Jesus, Our Faith and Values”. Our theme tonight is HOSPITALITY. Hospitality is a word that we regularly use in our everyday lives. Some biblical words and themes are not as common today.

The common dictionary definition of hospitality is quite universal, but the way that it is applied is quite different among various cultures. Hospitality is simply defined as “entertaining guests in a friendly and generous manner.” But how is that friendliness and generosity expressed?

I’ve shared with some of you that Kathy and I have had the privilege of having friends who are originally from Baghdad. This past fall Ameen, Eman and their two sons moved back to Tulsa for business reasons. We were all sad. We shared meals back and forth. We were invited to their house for a farewell meal which was like the others that Eman had cooked for us.

I really cannot do justice to the meal and the spread that was prepared for us. It took Eman two days to prepare the food. There were at least a dozen different dishes. The food from Iraq is delicious. As we sat at the table and shared the joy of the moment Kathy and I commented on the meal. It was simply extravagant. Eman smiled apologetically. She confessed that if her mother were there she would have chastised Eman for not cooking and serving even more. We could not begin to eat all the food. There were leftovers when they ate at our house, but nothing like that.

I asked them, because they are very religious people, if this kind of extravagance was normal or was it just a family thing. They said it was just the custom of the people of Iraq. So I asked the religious question. “Was this an expression of their faith.” They said it was. So I asked a second question. “Was this a mid-eastern custom and did it reflect the faith of all the Old Testament People?” Ameen said, “Yes, of course it did!” He then made it very clear that such extravagance is an expression, a response to the extravagance of God. When one begins each day recognizing that everything in the world is a sign of divine extravagance, one cannot help but respond in gratitude to God in prayer and in the way others are treated, especially the stranger, which is an expression of generosity.

Hospitality is a very interesting word to study in the scriptures. We can think of all kinds of stories in both Testaments about people, especially the strangers, being welcomed with generosity. The phrase, “killing the fatted calf”, is an expression of that tradition.

The New Testament story of “The Feeding of the Five Thousand” is a very important story about Biblical, faithful hospitality. There are times in life when we are just not

ready to host others and this was one of them. The disciples had worked hard all day and they were tired. So Jesus suggested that they take some time off and rest. Their boat ride to solitude probably took them from the west to the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. The crowd of followers could probably see where they were going. When they arrived at their destination they found thousands of people waiting for them. Jesus at that moment expressed the heart of God and the heart of graceful hospitality. Instead of giving in to his own impulses and his need for rest Jesus had compassion on them. In his heart he was moved by their needs so Jesus sat them down and taught them. As evening approached people must have been getting restless and probably hungry. The disciples suggested that the only practical thing to do with so many people was to send them home or to nearby villages where they could find enough food.

Jesus had other plans. He told his disciples to take care of the problem. Their immediate impulse was to spend all the money they had, 200 denarii. A denarii was the average daily wage for a laborer. But Jesus said, "No, just go and see what is already here. Look first for what God has already given you. They didn't find that much food, but Jesus sat them down in companies which formed eating groups. The crowd now gathered in holy fellowship entered into the spirit of generosity and love for neighbor that Jesus had just taught them. And Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed all the gifts of that moment that were signs of God's extravagant love. There was more than enough for everyone to be satisfied! You would have expected a different result, something like being one of the last in line at a church pot luck where people didn't bring enough and you were out of luck. It's that feeling that the welcome mat is pulled out from beneath you.

But they collected all the leftovers, yes, leftovers. It was the leftovers, 12 baskets full that were the sign of hospitality, generosity, no, in this case extravagance! Who would have imagined such a thing?

We should add that in those days that after such formal meals all the scraps of left over food were gathered and swept up and put in one place. The belief was that by so doing it would keep away the demons of poverty! Perhaps noting leftovers these days in our culture could be a sign of keeping away the demons of greed, self-centered behaviors of all sorts, sometimes disguised as frugality? The leftovers could be a sign that people really cared enough to make sure there would always be more than enough. And in so doing the marks of hospitality, friendliness and generosity, could be experienced by those who need it them most?

As this story found new life in the early church it became a sign of even more. It became a sign of the Eucharist. It became an expression of Jesus communing with believers around table where God's generosity, God's most extravagant love took life in the person of Jesus. Fish and bread appear frequently in frescoes in the catacombs as symbols of the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It has become tradition at the celebration of Holy Communion to lift the bread and wine blessing them as Jesus blessed the fishes and loaves that day on a green hillside.

We are reminded, especially this Lenten Season, that when we come to table and receive Jesus with the bread and wine we experience God's most extravagant gift of love, given and shed for us on a cross, sacrificed for us so that we can really live. Given and shed for us so that we can be freed to share God's hospitality, extravagant love together as a church and everywhere in our lives. Amen!