

March 1, 2009
Mark 1:9-15
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Hospitality

If you looked at the sermon title, “Hospitality” and you listened to the gospel reading you could be wondering how do these two go together? That’s exactly the question I’ve asked myself this week.

First, the sermon title. A few weeks ago Winston and I decided to use these five Lenten Sundays in March to explore characteristics of vital mainline churches. Both of us and some of you have read works by Diana Butler Bass in the last few years. She is an author and educator, who with funding from the Lilly Foundation went in search of vital mainline congregations.

When she began her work, the conventional wisdom among many people was that the only vital form of Christian faith these days was politically conservative evangelicalism. When she told people of her quest, they sometimes chuckled: “Vital mainline churches? Must have been a short journey!” or they editorialized, “Aren’t those the ‘frozen chosen’? What’s so interesting about them?” (pg. 3) But, she knew there were ‘other’ Christians because she is one of them.

In fact, she found many very interesting congregations around the country, of different denominations and different character. Yet they had some things in common. The summary of what she found is expressed in the title of her most recent book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*.

In these weeks of Lent, Winston and I are going to reflect on some of the characteristics that Diana Butler Bass has identified as common among these vital mainline congregations – hospitality, spiritual testimony, reinterpretation of tradition, practicing faith, theological reflection.

We decided to focus on hospitality this Sunday because of communion. In communion, we invite one another to gather at table and we trust in God’s invitation that we are welcome.

In every vital congregation that Diana found, hospitality ranked as one of the strongest spiritual practices of the congregation. Welcoming newcomers graciously and intentionally was one of the ways they live out their faith. In the United Church of Christ in recent years we have put it this way: *No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.*

Second, the lectionary text for today. This first Sunday of Lent is always a reading about the temptation of Jesus. Temptation and hospitality- an interesting combination. Typically we would focus on temptation today and be reminded of the human struggle with this reality. As Ogden Nash so impishly put it, “I can resist anything but temptation.” But Mark’s version of the temptation is very brief, and embedded in a compact, three part mini-drama that tells much about Jesus of Nazareth.

As I read the text today, listen not only to the temptation, but also to any expressions of hospitality.

Mark 1:9-15

This is a three part mini-drama

Jesus baptism - an experience of blessing and hospitality from God.

His temptation – a struggle with the burdens of this blessing.

His ministry – getting to the business of proclaiming the good news of blessing.

What does this have to do with hospitality? Being driven into the wilderness, and by the Spirit none-the-less, is not exactly hospitable. Who wants to journey, literally or spiritually, to where the wild things are? Even though we all do.

Yes, this text is not obviously about hospitality, but I decided to stay with it because this is how the church traditionally begins Lent, and looking at it through the lens of hospitality I think we can tease out some connections.

- In his baptism, Jesus is open to God's spirit and God's spirit is open to him. They are hospitable one to another.

-In his experience of temptation, Jesus had to confront whether or not he would accept the illusion of 'hospitality' from forces that are ultimately destructive, which the biblical tradition calls Satan. Not all that glitters is gold, not all that smiles, is truly gracious. At the same time, there is a phrase of amazing grace in this passage. In the midst of this time when Jesus struggled with the burdens that his very gifts and blessings presented, it says the angels waited on him. God's Spirit stayed with him in the dark times. He was not alone.

- In his ministry, Jesus invites people to be open to God's presence.

Threads of hospitality are interwoven into today's passage. And there is an interplay between the roles of host and guest, which is a prominent theme in reflections on Christian hospitality. Sometimes we are the guest and sometimes we are the host.

I had an experience of this interplay between host and guest on Thursday night when I had the opportunity to hear Yo Yo Ma play at Merrill Auditorium. I'm not a musician so I can't tell you about the intricacies of his technique, but I can tell you about his person. He was invited to come and play, so at some level he was our guest. Yet, in his manner he so graciously welcomed us into his own experience of music that we became his guests. It was a wonderful experience of hospitality, even in the midst of many people.

At the beginning of the service today, we asked you to share with one another, "What helps you to feel welcome, especially in a new place?" The young person I spoke to said, "When someone is kind to you." Diana reports in her book that after many visits to various churches, when she asked her seven year old daughter which church she liked best, her daughter, Emma, immediately named one of the churches and said, "Because Emily (a teenager at that church) was nice to me."

In recent years my experience is that new people come into the life of a congregation because they have been invited to come by someone they already know, or they experienced genuine kindness and a gracious welcome from the people they first meet when they come.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

It's not always easy to be hospitable. Sometimes the people we are trying to welcome are disruptive or unseemly, or insensitive to our cultural norms. It is tempting to ignore or dismiss them. Often we are distracted and caught up in our own stuff. Kathleen Norris in her book, *Amazing Grace*, writes of the core commitment of the Benedictine orders to the practice of hospitality. However, even monks are human. In one situation, a visitor had the experience of going to the abbey visitor center to ask some questions. After a few minutes, the monk on duty had been short with her, saying, finally, "I don't have time for this; we're trying to run a monastery here!" (pg. 265) Needless to say, he found her again later and apologized, which expressed deep and transformative hospitality.

Sometimes we're in a painful place on life's journey. Maybe we're overworked and stressed like the monk. Maybe we're struggling with temptations, even those that come in relationship to blessings. Maybe we're journeying through the valley of the shadow of death and our hearts are grieved. Where shall we go with these matters? Where are we welcome?

I've been struck over the years when people tell me that they don't want to come to church because they know they will spend the time crying. To which I respond, "What better place is there to cry than church?" We laugh with those who are laughing, and weep with those who are weeping. Which means we need to calm our own uneasiness when someone around us is crying. I think part of why we get uneasy is because we don't know how to solve it. Maybe we should be like the angels in today's gospel story and simply wait on the one who is crying. I like this word "wait" because it has many nuances. It means to look after

and care for, if the person wishes some kind of aid. But it also means to simply wait. To be beside, to sit with, to stand next to, and hold company with the one who is grieving. To do so is to be an angel, a messenger of God.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

On Wednesday evening some of us gathered at the front of the sanctuary to mark the beginning of Lent by reflecting on and affirming our baptisms. We, like Jesus, realized that in our baptisms

- we experience the hospitality of God
you are my beloved child .
- we seek to be hospitable to God's Spirit
- we commit to walking in the way of Jesus.

The role of host and guest are intertwined.

This interplay of roles of host and guest is one of the oldest themes in Christian Literature about hospitality. As the letter to the Hebrews (13:2) says, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

It happened to those on the road to Emmaus. They invited the stranger in to break bread together. He was their guest. Yet in the breaking of the bread, he became the host, and they recognized the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread. May it be so with us this day.