

“STRANGER & STRANGER”

Romans 12: 9-15

NCNC Annual Meeting

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Mary Susan Gast

No matter who you are. No matter where you are on life's journey. You are welcome here. Talofa lava.

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This is God's radical hospitality. Love on the loose. The table spread in the wilderness. The manna—the bread of heaven—that takes shape as dew on the grass, to sustain us in the deserts of despair and captivity. “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;” we read in Isaiah, “and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” [Isaiah 55: 1] God's radical hospitality.

“For the Holy One your God is God of gods and Sovereign of sovereigns, the great God, mighty and awesome, Who is not influenced by wealth and takes no bribe, Who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and Who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.” [Deuteronomy 10: 17-18]

Who loves the strangers. Who shows hospitality.

Hospitality starts with the basics. Food. Hospitality is something that you taste.

For me hospitality lingers in my mouth as the taste of fresh coconut cake, eaten on an impossibly steamy night at a little frame church in the open country outside Petal, Mississippi in the summer of 1964—Mississippi Freedom Summer—when extending hospitality to “outside agitators” carried severed implications.

In Moscow, in 1995, hospitality tasted like the xolubki and pashka of my childhood, as I sat amid a jangle of women in a kitchen so tiny that anyone

present could reach across the table to the stove and pick up some other festive dish on that Easter Sunday.

I grew up steeped in the hospitality of Eastern European immigrants, serfs, who were part of the estate, who were owned by the land they worked—rather than the more widely-accepted reverse of that situation—and who could not let anyone enter their homes without offering them food. Traveling was dangerous; visitors were rare and cherished, even though there might be a certain awkwardness about how to receive them. Thirty-some years ago I went with my tall blond blue-eyed husband to an extended-family event in my people's New World immigrant homeland of Whiting IN. Amid the hundreds of short stocky dark-haired people present, Roger sort of stood out. But nobody said anything. Roger and I were seated next to one another near the center of one of those long tables of the kind set up in most every church hall you've ever been in, and there was much conversation going on as we passed the platters of ethnic food and ate. At one point Roger looked at me and asked what a particular food item was. I explained it to him and then turned to the distant cousin seated on the other side of me and said in an off-hand tone, "My husband's not Slovak, so he....." A hush struck the table, then a collective gasp, as 50 people exclaimed with one voice, "He's not Slovak! Ah, it's so good that he's here!"

Hospitality. Welcoming the stranger.

In 1998 Penny Phillips, Joyce Ellis, and I—along with 9 other UCC clergywomen—visited Samoa. I have traveled to many different places, but nowhere have I been so embraced by a physical setting as in Samoa. Warm, moist, heavy air; jagged green mountains; safe harbor in Pago Pago with a shipwreck reminder that the peaceful ocean can be riled by hurricanes. I stayed in Alofau with Rev. Elisaia and Faalelei Soli and their family; then with Rev. Tusi and Afou Seanoa in Petesa Uta. The village of Fagasa hosted a 'ava ceremony for us visitors, the first time they had done so for women. There were many suas, much exposure to this climate of hospitality where, in the past travel had been dangerous, visitors had been rare; and where in the past and in the present, visitors are cherished.

On the day after we arrived, our host families arranged a trip by boat to the tiny island of Aunu'u. There was a 5 dolphin escort as we skimmed over the Pacific, 25 of us chatting away in Samoan and English. We landed, walked

around the fields of Aunu'u in two's and three's and began to realize that there was one young woman among the group who was not Samoan and not American. When we got back into the boat, Miko, who was Japanese, was talking about how she had taken a year off from her work to make a round the world trip. She had read her guidebooks, which had told her that she could get a boat ride to Aunu'u, but didn't give a schedule, and was so pleased that she had come along at the right time, but wondered what the fare was. At that point one of the Samoan men said, "Oh, no charge; we arranged for the boat ride for our guests, and we are so happy to have you with us." Someone asked Miko where she was staying. She gave the name of a hotel. Someone else asked how it was. She made a very polite reference to the moga mogas. The trip passed quickly and pleasantly and we all went our own ways. That evening all the families gathered for dinner. We got out of cars and pickups, stood under the full moon, catching up on our adventures as we waited for everyone to arrive. The last car drove up, the host couple emerged, along with one of the clergywomen—and Miko. "Oh, we just couldn't let her stay in that hotel," the hosts said. "She'll stay with us. It's good that she's here."

Hospitality. It more than hints at the possibility that we may be different from those we welcome ["He's not Slovak!"] and that those differences are a source of joy and wonder, to be cherished. [It's good that she's here.]"

Hospitality is generosity and cordiality, geniality and friendliness, but it goes deeper than surface kindness.

Have you seen the film "Hotel Rwanda?" Yes, it's set in the raw brutality of those weeks of genocide in 1994. The drama, though, occurs in the heart and soul of the main character, Paul Rusesabagina, who was the manager of a major hotel in Kigali. As the film opens, Mr. Rusesabagina is concentrating on developing a style of graciousness as well as enhancing his formidable skills as a manager and a host who knows how to please his rich and influential guests. A Hutu, he is not at first distracted from his duties by the sudden upsurge of Hutu militancy. Married to a Tutsi, Paul is devoted to his family, respected by his friends and the hotel staff, as well as by the guests he serves.

Out in the city, arranging for fresh produce and seafood to be delivered to the hotel, one of the merchants gives him a Hutu shirt, saying, "It's time to wear this, so we can tell the Hutus from the Tutsi cockroaches." In the car,

on the way back to the hotel, the Tutsi driver is terrified at the commotion in the streets, the roadblocks. When they are stopped, Paul absently picks up his Hutu shirt and gives a half-hearted [clenched fist] “Hutu power” and they are allowed to continue on.

But the level and tone of the violence increases. His in-laws disappear; his neighbors flee to his house for safety. He manages to get 20 Tutsi neighbors, plus his wife and children, into the hotel vans and then into the Hotel Rwanda. Death is all around them. All the Europeans and Americans are ordered out of the country. The U.N. peacekeeping forces are reduced to dozens. And more people keep arriving at the Hotel Rwanda. Aid workers and religious workers deliver orphans to his care. He puts them in a suite and tells a staff person to take care of them. “What do I do?” she asks. “Feed them, bathe them, put them to bed,” he replies. She smiles in understanding.

Meanwhile he bribes army officers, phones the hotel manager in Belgium, pleads with the U.N. forces to protect them, and scrounges food. When the Hutu insurgent leader demands the hotel guest list, Paul has everyone check out, saying, “You must check out now; if you feel you will have trouble paying your bill, stop and see my assistant and he will take care of it.” He then has the staff remove all the room numbers, invites everyone back into the rooms they have just vacated and presents to the impatient Hutu commander the last guest list on the computer, the one generated before martial law took over.

Here is someone who has been part of what we refer to as “the hospitality industry,” and who has taken hospitality to heart. He has gone beyond the pursuit of style, to a style of living that will not let him turn away the needy who come to him, nor narrowly define those who are in his care. Family, friends, strangers, orphans, Hutus, Tutsis—they are all in his care. This is God’s radical hospitality, the hospitality of Le Atua, Who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and Who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.” Radical hospitality. Radical. At the root of the Almighty’s identity.

Hear, O My people, while I counsel you;
 O people, if you would only listen to Me!
 Do not allow false gods among you;
 Do not bow down before anything less than the Almighty.

I am the Holy One, your God,
Who brought you up out of the land of captivity.
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it with good things.
....you I would feed with the finest of the wheat,
And with honey from the rock I would delight you."

Psalms 81: 8-10, 16

This is God's radical hospitality. Taste and see.