

Radical and Prophetic Hospitality

Address prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Northern California Nevada Conference
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Note to reader: The address I prepared in written form is not exactly what I said in the actual presentation. In particular I left out one piece that, at the moment, seemed to get in the way of the flow. I have left it in here in case anyone is interested.
I am putting the outline of the actual address in front of the written version.

Also, I understand that at one point I seemed to imply that no one in the UCC reads the Bible. I know lots of UCC people steeped in the Bible - but I also know that many if not most of us do not study it enough to have an effective voice, informed by scripture, to counter the claims of those who use scripture in, what I think are, damaging ways.

Outline of the Address

- I. Theological foundations of Radical and Prophetic Hospitality and why we need to take a serious look at the Bible.
- II. The Differences between Ancient (or Traditional) hospitality and Modernist hospitality
 - Thidwick hospitality - Individualist and based on freedom of movement
 - Genesis 18-19 Hospitality of Abraham and Lot - and the lack of it in Sodom.
 - Why we resist knowing this story
 - What happens when we fail to note that the destruction of Sodom has to do with the violation of hospitality.
- III. Why radical hospitality has to be prophetic
 - Psalm 39
 - Walter Bruggeman's two theologies in the Bible
 - Theology supporting the powers that be
 - Theology calling those powers into question
 - Really listening to our guest calls us to act on behalf of the guest

Written version of the address

I. The Theological Foundation

God's Invitation to the universe

The universe exists at divine invitation. Think about it. The biblical understanding of creation as a Word calling everything that is into existence describes an act of invitation. Without that Word was not anything made that was made. Nothing and no one we see around us or know to exist anywhere is outside of this act of invitation. The universe exists by act of divine hospitality. We, you and I, exist by act of divine hospitality. The stranger and even the enemy exist by the same act of divine hospitality.

God's judgement that it was good to invite us

And the writer of the first chapter of Genesis was convinced that God thought this hospitable invitation to all of creation was good. Thousands of years later we continue to affirm

this conviction that God thought this invitation was good. God's invitation is not a reciprocal invitation because we first invited God. God invited us first because God thought it was a good idea. It is in the profound hope of God's continued conviction that the invitation to us was a good idea, that I want to think with you this morning about what it means for our life together as a conference of churches in the United Church of Christ.

II. The Ancient Obligations of Hospitality

Acceptance of the guest incorporates the guest into family

We are not used to thinking about hospitality in deeply theological terms. Usually our thoughts of hospitality run to providing coffee after worship services and wearing name tags. But traditions of hospitality developed along with human society as critical survival strategies. The sketchy habits of hospitality we maintain today are rooted in far more complex traditions in which the offer of hospitality was an offer that changed our lives and our commitments.

The hospitality obligations in the ancient world lie behind the stories of the Bible as assumptions. There is surprisingly little said in a legalistic fashion about hospitality. There was apparently no need to explain what everyone took for granted. On the other hand, one of the most well-known instances of the wrath of God falling upon a community is the destruction of the city of Sodom. And the crime was the violation of hospitality to the stranger. In a way, so too was the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. Generations before this, Pharaoh had offered hospitality to the family of Israel, and then violated that hospitality by enslaving them.

If you read the story, in Genesis 18 and 19, of the mysterious visitors to Abraham, visitors he recognized as angels of God, and who, after their visit with Abraham, went on to visit Lot in Sodom and met with the inhospitality of that great city, you will see in the story an outline of the rituals of hospitality in Israelite society. The stranger is not automatically someone you to whom you would want to offer hospitality. The stranger in the ancient world was always tested first, with questions, or with observation. Only when the stranger was deemed not to be a threat to the community was he or she welcomed. The ceremony of foot washing was the ritual of turning strangers into guests, and therefore into temporary family members. Once you have accepted guests, you are obligated to care for and defend them, even at the cost of your own life or property - hence Lot's offer of his own daughters in place of his guests to the mob outside his door. When the guests leave they are transformed back into strangers (either friends or enemies). Therefore it is in the host's best interest to act so that the guest leaves as a friend. You as host may someday be a stranger and need hospitality. Though you may be in a position of power and privilege as host at the moment when you have a guest, you should act as if that person will one day be your host, with your life in their hands.

Guest incurs obligations

Just as the host has obligations to the guest, so too the guest has obligations to the host and also to other guests in the household. The guest is in a liminal position, needing protection and not completely able to act independently. The guests must do several things to make it easy for the host, leave their weapons at the door, abide by the codes of behavior of the household, and eat what is offered. The guest is temporarily kin to everyone in the household including the other guests. If we return to the theological foundation of our consideration of hospitality. In

truth we are all guests, here temporarily for however long, kin to one another. We exist all our lives in the liminal position of guests in this world. Do we leave our weapons at the door? Do we abide by the codes of behavior of the household? (more about that later). And do we eat what is offered? Or do we rather stay armed to be sure to get our way? And abide by our own set of rules? And insist on some other kind of food? These questions, as you see, can be asked of us on many levels, from the physical situation of our lives in the United States to the spiritual attitude we bring to church with us.

III. Why we fail to be hospitable in the modern world

Thidwick hospitality

Some of us may have grown up in households that practiced this ancient tradition of hospitality with all of its depth, but mine did not. As a child I was introduced to hospitality by being taught to sit and talk with guests who came to our house, and to invite my friends in for a cookie. I was taught to save the biggest piece of pie for the guest. But somewhere there was a limit. The limit was presented memorably in a book by Dr. Suess, *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*. This is the story of a moose in the forests somewhere in the north. One day a bird asks if it can build a nest in Thidwick's antlers. Sure, why not. Soon other small animals invite themselves into Thidwick's by now crowded head, until finally he even has a bear sitting there on his head among all the animals. As winter approaches, hunters come into the forest and shoot at Thidwick. His only escape is to remember that every winter a moose loses his antlers. Just in time he tosses his guests off and runs away. The last picture in the book shows the whole rack of antlers, animal guests and all, stuffed and hanging on the wall of the hunter's house. Now I realize this is a story about boundaries, but it also illustrates a fundamental modern concept of the limits of hospitality different from the ancient tradition. In the increasing individuality and individual isolation of modernity, the limit of hospitality is the point where it threatens the individual's life. In the ancient tradition, the purpose of hospitality was not the convenience of an individual guest, but the very survival of humanity. There the limit was the survival of the guest not the host. The ancient host would give up his or her life for the guest.

To bring the Thidwick principle into the church - I thought about what we do, often without thinking, to throw off our guests when the burden of being a host becomes too difficult. We say we are welcoming of everyone at our churches. We say there are no bouncers, there are no barriers. Yet when we look around our congregations, every one of us asks why there are not more visitors, or why visitors do not stay. Could it be that we have invisible bouncers in our sanctuaries and fellowship halls?

One may be named Lack of Patience -we sent out an invitation and no one came - we won't go to all that trouble again. Another, Lack of Kindness - We really wish they would go to someone else's church - actually we don't mind if they overhear us say so. Or is our bouncer named Envy - we don't want them to stay because they do something so much better than we do that it provokes our criticism - we do not want them to show us up. Or, Boastfulness - of course they will come to our church - ours is the best. Or Arrogance - we don't really need them - they can stay as long as they do not get in our way. Or Rudeness - we don't have time to talk to them, explain anything, or make things easy, they are coming into our community, they can do things our way. Or Insisting on Our Own Way - Ours is a higher, better, form of worship, our theology is more up to date, our social witness is more politically correct, we have never done it any other way and do not want to change. They are welcome to come and do things our way. Is our

bouncer named Irritation? - After all this they are still coming to our church - still making us feel uncomfortable and not fitting in. Or is the bouncer named Resentment? - After all these new people have come in, it just doesn't seem like our church anymore. They have taken over. Surely our bouncer is not named Rejoicing in Wrongdoing - Oh look - they made a mistake - see we told you they did not belong here.

You can probably think of other names for the invisible bouncers among us. I borrowed my list from Paul's famous characterization of what love is not. Hospitality is the practical expression of love toward our neighbor, a spiritual discipline. Hospitality is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful or rude. Hospitality does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Like love Hospitality bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things.

Movement and the attenuation of relationships

Hospitality emerges from the need for individuals who ordinarily lived only among a single group of people to travel between communities. Staying with one's own people was the norm, moving about was unusual and chancy. We on the other hand have become unrooted. The norm for us is to leave home and go to a strange country where no one knows our name and make an individual life for ourselves. In one statistic, California people move from dwelling to dwelling an average of every five or six years. The result of this movement and isolation from family and friends and familiar landscapes, especially in the American West, makes community difficult. We often do not live where we were born. We often do not live in one place long enough to form deep friendships. We often do not bother to try any longer.

Movement is still chancy, but there are few settlements within which we can seek hospitality and shelter on our journeys. These days people do not have an automatic reason to seek out a church. They do not think of a church as able to provide hospitality from the loneliness and isolation of our perpetual motion society. People with no experience of a church may simply not know what a supportive community of love can do for individuals and for society. People with hurtful experiences of one church may not know that church does not have to be that way.

IV. Nature of Radical Hospitality

When we open the door in hospitality to these strangers in our society, we incur the obligations of the host, whether we feel the stirring of that primal memory or not. One of the spiritual disciplines we could undertake together to strengthen our own souls and our churches is to reflect on the ancient tradition of hospitality and what it means for us in Northern California and Nevada in 2005.

What is this radical hospitality we long for ourselves and which we say we desire to offer to others? To be radical means to get to the root, even to follow the root all the way down into the soil that nourishes the whole plant. That is why I began with the reflection that the universe exists by an act of divine hospitality. And that God, before anything ever happened, declared the universe (all of it, even us) to be good. But at that moment we incurred the obligation of the guest. At rock bottom we are always both givers and receivers of hospitality. When we forget that we are also guests, here by the invitation of God, we can live under the illusion that we have everything to give. When we forget that we are also guests, here by the invitation of God, we

can think that we earned what we have to give, and that we therefore have the right to decide who will be received into our hospitality and who will not, according to whether we think they deserve it. When we forget that we are also guests, we forget that all other people are our kin. They are our relatives, our siblings, our mothers and fathers. In our temporary stay here in this world, we, as guests, have an obligation to live as kin to all others, not as independent individuals.

Remembering our own vulnerability and in thanksgiving for the hospitality we have received, we offer hospitality to others. That becomes our life's calling as Christians, showing forth the love of God, showing forth the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, until Christ comes again, until the Realm of God is established on earth. This is the radical nature of hospitality, the root of the meaning of human society. Leaving our weapons at the door, living by the disciplines of community instead of by individual desire, and being content with enough rather than seeking more, we live in gratitude for God's hospitality. Literally, we will not survive without it. When we in turn offer hospitality, if we really care for our guests enough to give our lives for them, we find almost at once that we cannot do so without being prophets.

V. Why Radical Hospitality Makes Prophetic Activity Necessary

Radical hospitality requires us to be prophets. A prophet is one who bridges the human and the divine. Our radical hospitality makes God's hospitality tangible, it makes hope to be realized, it is a way to share God's embrace of human suffering, of the suffering of creation.

One of the biblical scholars of the United Church of Christ, Walter Bruggeman, points out two theological streams in the biblical traditions. One is what he calls the common theology, found in most societies of the ancient world, and I would argue still found in our own society. This is the theology in which a creator deity rules the world and legitimates the human power structures. Pain, in this theology is largely a consequence of disobedience, a consequence of violating the order of the day. Along side this theology in the biblical tradition is another theological stream. This alternative tradition emerges in the Biblical narratives in the day when Israel dared to ask why God did not act to rescue them. All one has to do is read the Psalms, Job, or the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Bruggeman says of this moment,

The moment when Israel found the nerve and the faith to risk an assault on the throne of God with complaint was a decisive moment against legitimization. The lament is a dramatic, rhetorical, liturgical act of speech that is irreversible. When spoken, it is done and cannot be recalled. It makes clear that Israel will not longer be a submissive, subservient recipient of decrees from the throne. There is a bold, movement from Israel's side – a voice that does not silently and docilely accept but means to have its dangerous say, when in the face of God. In risking this form of speech, the conventional distribution of power is called into question. it is no longer placidly assumed that God has all the power and the covenant partner must simply submit. pain speaks against legitimacy, which now for the first time is questioned as perhaps illegitimate.” Walter Bruggeman, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)27.

When we receive another in hospitality, it is not enough to offer a cup of coffee and a name tag. We must be able to sit with them when they cry out like the psalmist,

But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
O Lord, why do you cast me off?
 Why do you hide your face from me?
Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
 I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dread assaults destroy me.
They surround me like a flood all day long;
 from all sides they close in on me.
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
 my companions are in darkness. (Psalm 88)

And we must offer to them a connection between heaven and earth. We cannot disregard their pain. We cannot be silent about the cause of their pain. If it means we have to call into question the powers of our world because of it, we still cannot be silent. If we practice radical hospitality, we will never be able to be entirely safe in the empire. Radical and prophetic hospitality will always be uneasy with the human power structures and cannot be inactive in the presence of suffering, oppression, or unmerciful or unjust judgement coming from those powers. Jesus' embrace of our pain on the cross was not an individual matter. In that act of radical hospitality Jesus embraced the pain of humanity. We cannot do less. If we are to be prophetic in our hospitality, our guest will find a safe place to voice her pain or his pain. Our listening can give hope, but it is not enough just to listen. We must then add our voice to that of our guest, and speak to power, even to God. Whatever it is that threatens our guest becomes our responsibility.

Especially when our guest suffers from some unjust social structure, like racism or homophobia, we cannot avoid responsibility by saying we are open to all people. We have to be alert to the invisible bouncers. Listening to our guest, really listening, is the first obligation of the radical and prophetic host. The prophets of the Bible dare to call upon God to listen. They dare to call upon the powers of human society to listen. The second obligation is to speak up and act up until what ever it is that is harming our guests is dismantled. If we have listened to our guest (our fellow guest remember), if we have called upon God to listen, and if we then speak out to power, nothing we do to achieve justice and peace will ultimately fail.

Radical and Prophetic Hospitality can never be simply a church-growth strategy. It has to be nothing less than a sustained effort to change the world.

Walter Bruggeman, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

James Perkinson's *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (Palgrave, 2004)

Archie Smith Jr, and Ursula Riedel Pfaefflin's *Siblings by Choice: Race Gender and Violence* (Chalice Press, 2004)

Dr. Seuss, *Thidwick the Big Hearted Moose* (Random House, 1948)