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Hospitality: A Spiritual Resource for Building Community

"Overwhelming Gratitude"

There is the sense of overwhelming gratitude
which is ours because life has continued
to unfold within us and about us,
so that we have a full measure
of strength and vigor; overwhelming gratitude
for all the graces of renewal by which
our lives are sustained, nestled,
and nurtured; overwhelming gratitude
that it is as well with us and our land as it is.¹

"...whoever is forgiven little, loves little."²

Introduction

Hospitality is a resource central to pastoral care, mental, and spiritual well-being. This paper does not transform hospitality into a technique by informing the reader of its application. Rather, it is dedicated to the memory of Thomas J. Pugh and will raise questions to stimulate conversations about hospitality and community.

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¹Howard Thurman, "Overwhelming Gratitude," in *The Centering Moment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1996; reprint, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1980), 57 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

²Luke 7:47b.

In an age of managed-care and the refinement of technique, where does gratitude and hospitality harmonize with pastoral care? The practice of hospitality is an important building block for communities of care and especially during times of uncertainty, transition, or fundamental social change. Hospitality is described as the cordial, warm or generous reception of, or disposition toward, guests or strangers.

A few years ago the writer and his wife gave a party, inviting people from our places of work. I knew some of her co-workers, and she knew some of mine. There was one man whom I assumed was from my wife's office. He was dressed in a sports jacket, white shirt, and tie. He moved around in a friendly manner, seemingly enjoying himself, eating and drinking copiously. When it was time to go, he thanked us, saying, "He'd had a great time."

After our guests departed, while we were cleaning and talking, I asked, "By the way, who was that guy in the sports jacket, white shirt and tie?" My wife suddenly stopped what she was doing and looked at me and said, "I thought you had invited him!" Indeed, he was a stranger to us!

This stranger was generously received, fed, and treated the same as everyone. When leaving, he said he had a great time. But would he have been so well received had we known that he was uninvited—a party crasher? This experience led me to reflect several moral, ethical, and theological questions: how do we understand our situation before God? Is hospitality itself the basic experience; or does it emerge from something more fundamental, such as experiences of divine-human forgiveness? What are the experiences or values that ground hospitality? Luke's gospel provides a story about hospitality and serves as a guide to our questions with implication for pastoral care.

Hospitality in Luke's Gospel

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.'

Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon. I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'Speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you her sins, which were many have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are

forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you: go in peace.'

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who have been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.³

All four gospels carry an account of a woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14: 3-9; Matt. 26:6-13; John 12:1-8; Luke 7:36-50). We have limited our focus to Luke's account. Let us understand the context of Luke's memorable story. Luke tells the story and this invitation to dinner takes place during Jesus' ministry in Galilee. We know that Luke has a special interest in the poor. In fact, Luke's gospel is sometimes referred to as "good news to the poor" and marginalized (4:18). In this gospel special blessings are promised to "the poor" (6:20), those "that hunger" (4:21), the captives, the blind, the oppressed, the depressed, the stranger, the lost, the least, and the last. By contrast, woes are pronounced upon the rich, the full, the complacent and the popular (vv. 24-26). It is in this context of "good news to the poor" and marginalized that Luke tells the story about the Pharisee's dinner invitation to Jesus. It is also the story about the unexpected appearance of the sinner woman. Her name was not on the list of invited guests. But she appeared. She was the stranger—the outsider,

³Luke 7:36-8:3 (NRSV).

the party crasher.

This is Luke's opportunity to tell us about hospitality through the ministry of Jesus. The hospitality Jesus requires is the utmost generosity and benevolence toward those who are in need. This story is part of the larger Christian account that forms our identity as pastoral care givers. What can we learn from this passage about forgiveness, gratitude, hospitality, and building-care-in-community? First, the story is retold in a slightly different way and pastoral care implications are identified.

Jesus has become a controversial figure in Galilee. Some applaud his prophetic words and deeds of healing, while others are angered that he would heal on the Sabbath or challenge their theology and interpretations of scripture. In fact, on one occasion, some, filled with wrath, ran him out of town, and were on the verge of throwing him over a cliff. So, to say that he was disputable is an understatement. Surrounded by these events, Jesus received an invitation to dinner by a Pharisee, and accepts this gesture of hospitality, amidst growing hostility.

Perhaps, we should applaud the Pharisee at this point. His actions were opposite from those who wanted to harm Jesus. It took courage for the Pharisee to invite Jesus to dinner. His associates could have interpreted his hospitality to Jesus as a sign of disloyalty. The host might have shown better sense had he gone with the developing tide of hostility toward Jesus. He would have been in solidarity with his group. But he did not. There is a saying: "a friend of a friend is a friend. The enemy of an enemy is a friend. But a friend of an enemy is an enemy." The Pharisee may have lost some friends and gained some enemies when he invited Jesus to dinner. In some instances, hospitality may entail risk-taking. The Phari-

see took a risk when he extended hospitality to Jesus.

Perhaps, it is easier to see how the woman took a risk. She is known in the story as a "sinful woman." She shows up uninvited and approaches Jesus in the house of Simon and in the presence of the other invited guests. It is a moment of embarrassment for Simon and for the woman as well. Her risk-taking is shown by her bold action. More importantly she is there because of her faith in Jesus and her trust that he will receive her with compassion. Because of this belief, she stood behind Jesus and began to weep; and her tears wet his feet. She then wipes them with her hair, anoints his feet with the oil, and kisses his feet.

No wonder Simon was embarrassed—perhaps stunned. The cultured people on his guest list would not have behaved like this woman of the street. Simon surmised that Jesus must not be a prophet after all, because if he really were, then he would not let this sinful woman touch him.

If Simon were hoping for a relaxed evening of good food and engaging conversation, then all assurance for that was now gone. Simon could only see that this sinful woman had ruined the evening. But Jesus sees her hospitality, her welcome of him in Simon's home. We note something important here about Jesus and hospitality. A reversal takes place. The sinful woman, the woman of the street, the uninvited one, the stranger, becomes the exemplar host and giver of hospitality. The one who came with tattered credentials and nothing to give, the loser, the impure one, the outcast—does not simply receive bounty, but gives bounty. Think about it. What is the source of her bounty? The one who is perceived as having nothing to offer and shabby credentials has everything to offer.

In order to help Simon understand what he sees in the

woman, Jesus tells the parable of the moneylender. Simon gets the point of the parable—that the one forgiven the larger debt is more grateful than the one who is forgiven little.

Imagine what it would be like if the bank that owns your mortgage said, “No more house mortgage to pay, ever.” Imagine what it would be like if that big financial debt that has been like a great weight on your shoulders was suddenly lifted. Now, if that debt were beyond your reach, then your gratitude would be great indeed. But if that debt were of little consequence, then its being forgiven would not mean much.

Recently a young man verbally shared with the writer a great debt owed by his sister. She was in financial difficulty, and the bank was about to foreclose on her house. Her husband, from whom she was recently divorced, failed to pay the IRS, and they owed over \$30,000 in back taxes. The sister, now a single parent and the lone breadwinner, was now deeply in debt. Her brother came to the rescue. He was able to help, and, together, they lifted the burden of debt. His sister’s gratitude was profound. Imagine, then, what it was like for this woman in Luke’s gospel. Her bold action of coming to Simon’s house uninvited, her weeping, and anointing Jesus’ feet with oil now has a different frame.

Jesus brings the story home to Simon, point by point. You provided no water; she washed with her tears. You gave me no kiss; she kissed my feet. You did not anoint my head; she anointed my feet. Now, the point of this passage in Luke’s story is about to be made. The *New American Bible* reads: “Her many sins are forgiven because of her great love.” Because she has first experienced forgiveness, she shows great love. It is these latter words—“her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love”—that are consistent

with the parable of the forgiven debtor.

It takes courage and compassion to extend hospitality, especially in times or situations when the recipient of hospitality responds with insensitivity or ingratitude. A typical response to ingratitude is to withdraw hospitality. But when one experiences the burden of a great debt being lifted, not only is there great relief but also a deep sense of gratitude waiting to be expressed. The forgiven debtor may well respond with generous acts of hospitality. Those who are forgiven will demonstrate hospitality.

Building Blocks of Community

This passage from Luke provides a basis for deepening our understanding of hospitality. Earlier, hospitality was defined as “the cordial, warm, and generous reception of or disposition toward guests or strangers.” There may be many reasons for being cordial and generous towards others: we are feeling good and everything seems to be going our way, today. We are attempting to cover how bad we are really feeling. We are curious. (We are hospitable toward those about whom we are curious.) And we remember our rearing—our general disposition towards others is one of friendliness. Therefore, being hospitable is part of our routine.

The woman in this story gives us a different basis for hospitality. Her welcoming, that is, her friendly, warm cordial disposition toward Jesus is rooted in the awareness that her many sins have been forgiven. She is a forgiven debtor, and her hospitality is rooted in a profound sense of gratitude and deep joy. It is not calculated nor is it cover for negative feelings. Her graciousness springs from an awareness of her own journey, “her many sins,” and from the experience of divine forgiveness. Like her tears, and like the oil in the ala-

baster jar, her joy is poured out in perpetual gratitude.

These, then, are among the building blocks of community: an awareness of one's situation before God, the experience of forgiveness, and hospitality as an expression of joy and gratitude. These can be the basis for the renewal of life, loving self, and others.

These derived principles from scripture are identified because they seem to be indispensable foundations for communities of care. A sense of deep unhappiness appears to pervade modern society. Perhaps, a source of this unhappiness is the society in which we live: violent, homophobic, sexist, racist, color and status conscious, high pressured, and stressful. It favors the young and physically abled, but discriminates against the poor, elderly, and those with disabilities. Human life appears all too often based upon legal contracts and utilitarian values—worth measured in terms of usefulness, social position, status, and wealth. In this light, hospitality is a function of social position. If you are high in social position, then gestures of hospitality from the dominant society are abundant. If you are low on the social scale, then gestures of hospitality from the dominant society are, by comparison, severely limited, if they are forthcoming at all.

Furthermore, we know that relationships built upon obligation alone can be abusive, oppressive, burdensome, joyless. This situation is not appealing. It is one from which we wish to escape. Most Americans value freedom almost more than anything else. "My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty . . ." is our collective song. We do not want to be obligated to anyone—"give me land . . . lots of land . . . beneath the open skies above, don't fence me in." Or, "please release me, let me go, for I don't love you any more. . ." Most drivers do not stop for stop signs. Many will intentionally

run a red light. In addition, we do not like to be told about it. Still, we are moral agents who make decisions that determine how resources are allocated, and how we and others shall live. Yet, we do not like constraints.

Obligations are like restrictions, and being free from constraints, obligation or debt is the desire of most of us. As pastoral care givers, our subject is the self as agent. The self as agent is always being realized or manifest in some social context. To use Larry Graham's phrase, "the care of persons" always implies "the care of worlds."⁴ As pastoral care givers, we work hard to free the self and others from a sense of unwanted obligation or guilt. We work to restore a sense of self-agency and responsible forms of freedom. But in what moral framework is this sense of self rooted?

In the parable, our situation is configured as debtors whose debt has been forgiven. But the depth of the experience of forgiveness depends upon awareness of the debt. Those who have been forgiven much will love much. Those who have been forgiven little will love little. The idea of the canceled debt (Luke 7:42) is the generative experience to which gratitude and acts of hospitality are responses. The ideal building block for communities of care include awareness of our own situation before God, the experience of forgiveness, gratitude, and hospitality.

What is our situation before God? If we use the parable in Jesus' story as guide, then we are forgiven debtors—entrusted members of the community to whom credit has been extended. We are bound together through an original act of forgiveness and have responsibilities to one another. To state

⁴See Larry Kent Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystemic Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

this differently, we are moral agents before God and are accountable to one another. By agency is meant the human capacity for language and purposeful activity. As a moral agent, one has the capacity for self-control, to think, work with others, make decisions, evaluate self, change harmful behavior, anticipate consequences, effect beneficial change. Indebtedness and interdependence upon others is recognized in co-creating worlds of meaning. Moral agency also means that one is open to others, expresses hospitality, concern, and care. One can face ignorance, work to understand others, and learn to speak the language of forgiveness or judgement. One can ask for help. In Christian perspective, a moral agent is one who has the capacity to recognize that life itself is a gift from God, and that we are bound together as forgiven debtors before God. We live in a community with other moral agents who are also forgiven debtors.

Here are the questions the writer poses and continues to struggle as a pastoral care giver: how do we face the emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of debt, increase awareness of our situation before God, and do so in ways that call forth a sense of forgiveness, joy and gratitude? How do we realistically configure hope in our work place or living space? How can we help the people who turn to us, to love much, rather than to love little?

Granted, these are huge questions. Struggling with them, we have an opportunity to travel together and thereby deepen a sense of care within community. In this light, the words of Howard Thurman are poignant—and worth repeating:

There is the sense of overwhelming gratitude which is ours because life has continued to unfold within us

and about us, so that we have a full measure of strength and vigor; overwhelming gratitude for all the graces of renewal by which our lives are sustained, nestled, and nurtured; overwhelming gratitude that it is as well with us and our land as it is.⁵

At the same time, we live in awareness of “anxiety, contrition, and embarrassment because we have not been mindful of the needs of others even in accordance with the light that is within us.”⁶ We have responsibilities toward one another as forgiven debtors. To be debtors before God is to live in the awareness that credit has been extended to us, and the most appropriate response is to extend credit to others—guests and strangers alike.

Conclusion

The writer does not know the uninvited man who appeared at his house and partied. Nothing is certain about his emotional, social, spiritual debts, or his situation before God. But these things need not be perceived in order to extend hospitality. Maybe he was hungry and we fed him; perhaps he was thirsty and we provided something for him to drink; maybe he was lonely and found a way to stem the tide of loneliness by circulating among a hospitable crowd. If any of this were true for that stranger, then he found a hospitable spirit. God’s healing Spirit can move among us in ways of which we are unaware.

If we were to become a self-conscious healing community that Friday evening when the stranger arrived at our

⁵Thurman, *Centering Moment*, 57.

⁶Ibid.

house, then we would have been willing to do more than just party. We would have been alert to issues of justice and injustice, and intentional about hearing and sharing the pain as well as the joys of another. Sometimes that happens at a party, but such sharing is limited—ending when the party is over. A sense of caring community arises, however, where we acknowledge our sense of indebtedness, experience forgiveness, acceptance, and express gratitude. Truly grateful people, like the sinful woman, share their joy. This sharing counters jealousy, greed, and selfishness. In communities of care, persons learn to forgive and trust each other, recognizing God's amazing grace moving within them and deepening the wellsprings of compassion.

As pastoral care givers, how do we face the emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of debt and increase awareness of our situation before God in ways that elicit mutual responsibility, forgiveness, joy and gratitude? Extending hospitality to guest and stranger is a resource for renewing our emotional, moral, and spiritual lives—one small way to extend meaning to those who live on the ragged edge of loneliness and despair.