

The Other Side of Hospitality

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[This is the first half of a “tag-team” sermon presented at our Worship-in-the-Park. Pastor John King of Richfield UCC presented the second half.]

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.” [Hebrews 13:2] These words from the Letter to the Hebrews are often used by us preacher-types to encourage Christians to broaden and enhance our welcome and hospitality. I want to do that this morning, but by approaching it from a different perspective. For many of us, showing “hospitality to strangers” means that we follow Christ’s example of welcoming and affirming those people who society often dismisses as being strange or suspect, different or deficient. Yet for me, an additional motive for extending this hospitality comes from my personal experience of being seen and treated as strange and suspect, different and deficient.

Twenty-seven years ago, when I came out as being gay, I was tossed-out of the ministry of the Lutheran Church. Because of my background, I was able to get a job at Goodwill Rehabilitation Center in Columbus,

working with people with developmental disabilities. My hope was that I could still make a positive difference in the lives of other people; and to some degree, I did. What I didn't realize, however, was the tremendous difference those other people would make in *my* life. At that time, I no longer had a place of acceptance in the church where I had been raised. I also no longer had a place of real acceptance within the family where I had been raised. In the eyes of my church, my family, and to a certain extent in my own eyes, my being gay meant that I was "damaged goods" - no longer worthy of welcome, inclusion, or affirmation. Yet in my new position at Goodwill, I immediately found a welcoming and supportive community and family. After *years* in the church of hearing, preaching, and singing about "Amazing *Grace*", I discovered my deepest experience of that grace among a group of people with no particular religious affiliation. I was absolutely overwhelmed by the acceptance and love that I received from these people in the field of Developmental Disabilities - coworkers and clients alike!

People who have a pronounced mental or physical impairment have no "closet" in which to hide. Generally, they present themselves as they genuinely are; and in doing so, they teach us all an extremely valuable lesson. Many of them share their joy, enthusiasm, and love - as well as their sadness, and disappointment -

with an open sincerity which invites those around them to be more vulnerable and honest about themselves. They remind us that we all need acceptance and affirmation, compassion and care, help and healing. As long as I live, will be extremely grateful for the healing I received from my good friends at Goodwill. And I realize that this healing had a lot to do with me finally and fully accepting myself for who I am: with my abilities and my disabilities, my faith and my failings, my strengths and my strangeness! At that critical time in my life, I was truly blessed to be welcomed and affirmed by people who accepted me just as I am, and who helped me realize that God's claim and calling in my life remained as strong and faithful as ever. As a former pastor, I was soon adopted as the unofficial chaplain for this ragtag, religiously ambiguous community. I conducted weddings and funerals, provided counsel and comfort to these people who - like me - didn't quite fit-in with mainstream society or religion. And in time, I was able to find a new Church Home, with a similar spirit of extravagant hospitality and grace.

Jesus Christ is completely at home with people on the fringes of society: the poor, the afflicted, the outcast, and the oppressed. They *are* his home, his family, and his friends! And when describing the crowning manifestation of the Divine Realm, Jesus tells us that it all boils-down to this: "Whatever you do to the *least* of

these - my brothers and sisters - you do it unto me!" So maybe, when you and I feel disconnected from our Divine Source - when we feel like our lives are floundering or worthless - we can recover a sense of belonging and purpose, by opening-up to those around us who need our compassion and care the most. Because when you and I actually see, genuinely respect, and lovingly affirm those people who our world regards as invisible or insignificant, we begin to see that Hidden Holy One - who has been with us all along. And when you and I warmly welcome those strangers into our hearts, Jesus Christ takes that opportunity to quietly slip-in - right along with them!