

Romans 12:9-13

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

“Radical Hospitality”**Rev. Rebecca McFee****August 22, 2010**

I hardly think of Harriet Beecher Stowe as the Martha Stewart of her time, so I was surprised to come across an essay that Harriet Beecher Stowe had written, entitled, "How Shall We Entertain Our Company?" I was intrigued. I decided it was important to read this one. It is a simple essay, a conversation between husband and wife, Mary Ann and Bob. They are thinking about throwing a party. Neither one is really keen on the idea. Mary Ann, however, is moving in that direction. After all, they've been to everybody else's party. It's time for them to reciprocate. Bob outright says, "I hate parties." He's very clear. And then he describes, as the essay would show you, several pages of why he hates parties. Let me just tell you a few.

He says, "They put your house all out of order. They give women headaches, and men get indigestion. Everybody stays out late, and the kids don't know what time it is. And more than that," he says, he has never found really good honest or authentic conversation. "Well," he says, "take our neighbors down the street, for example." They're named the Browns. He really likes Mrs. Brown. Mrs. Brown comes and sits on their porch sometimes, and they talk about real things. He says, "But, you know, I've got to tell you, when I see Mrs. Brown at a party, all she likes to talk about is her pink silk dress, and the crepes, and the hair, and the flowers that are in her hair." He didn't like parties. He didn't think they were real and authentic. They didn't get to what he wanted to talk about.

It's interesting how Harriet Beecher Stowe lines out this essay. It's interesting because perhaps it says a bit about how she understands hospitality. For her, hospitality is not just about the wine that is served, or the lace on someone's dress. It isn't where the tea was imported from, or what the flowers are that are on the table. The subtlety, as you read this essay, is that she wants us to contemplate a different way of looking at hospitality. It reminds you that her husband and her father were both theologians and Christian ministers. And it seems that she wants to push us to think about Christian hospitality being more than when we just throw a party.

For her, hospitality isn't just welcoming our guests. It's about welcoming a stranger. For her in her day, the stranger was that person from the South who had known nothing about life except from the eyes of a slave. And so for her, hospitality was also about challenging social norms. It isn't about a party. It's about the deep conversation that pushes us to be challenged in new ways. Her famous work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is full of illustrations of what happens when people radically engage in welcoming the stranger. It changes the world around us.

Our Christian Scriptures, both from the Old and the New Testament, point us in this same direction, that while we have a place called church, there is this hospitality that is part of our fiber, that encourages us to change with every person who comes into the door. That we are alive, and truly when we are alive it means that we will go in a new direction as we receive a new person. And that is who we are as a community. And so, I have a story for you.

A few years ago, I was one of those parents... Now, if you're a parent, particularly of little children, you know that there are these moments when you have Plan A, and as a parent, you want to make sure Plan A is what you do, but you know it's going to now work that way. I had Plan A in my mind. Here is what Plan A was. My husband has a conference in Washington, DC, and we have two small kids. My father grew up on a farm about forty minutes outside of DC, in Maryland. Plan A: Get up on Sunday morning and go to the family farm to stay a couple days. The family farm is now owned by my father's two cousins, who are retired United Methodist ministers. We would go to their church. It's the church where my father grew up. All of this is great. Isn't this a great idea? This is what we're going to do.

Sunday morning comes. I have forty minutes to get to the church service, but I'm going to leave with an hour and a half. That's what a good mother does. I leave from our hotel, and I start to drive toward Maryland. About twenty minutes later, I am in the parking lot of the Pentagon. This is not on Plan A. I turn to the kids, I say, "I didn't think we were going to see the Pentagon, but here it is." And we turn around, and we get further down the road. Further down mean further into Virginia. The very fine state of Virginia is not where I wanted to be. We kept driving, and we kept driving, and there were a lot of turns in there. And right when we hit the Maryland state line, one of my sons, in the back seat, threw up. I'm looking at my clock at this time. My watch is telling me that things aren't going well. I end up at this small little church in Cheltenham, Maryland, right when the

service starts. We pile into the little country church, where my other son is turning to people he doesn't know, saying, "Get me out of here, I don't want to be here." I went through the service thinking to myself, "And just think, after the service is over, we get to go back to a houseful of antiques."

That's what we did. Clark and Bea welcomed us into their home. Bea handed me a very large glass of iced tea and said, "Sit over there." And Clark came out and said, "I think I'll take your two kids." They went up to a landing where the bedrooms were, and I couldn't really see, but I could hear what they were saying. And Clark lifted one of my sons and said, "Read to me what that says on the door. Isn't that your name? It is your name. It's your name because you're a guest in my house. I'm so glad you're here. We've never met before. We were strangers, but now we're family. You get to go in there and play with anything in that room." And then he picks up my other son and take him to the next door and say, "Well, I'll be. There's your name. You are welcome in my home."

Then he walked them down to another room, again, away from me, and sat down with them and said, "I understand you had a really bad morning. Can you tell me about it?" My oldest son, he perked up, and he started telling his cousin about this woman driver that was in the front of his van. She was not a good lady. She had yelled at them all morning. She had turned around in parking lots fast enough that his younger brother threw up. What a woman. My cousin Clark sat and listened to how miserable their morning had been with such a woman. And then they went and enjoyed the family farm. Hospitality is far more than a little piece of paper that's put on a door. It is about creating a space for a stranger, and welcoming them as you hear their story. It's their story, it's not even their mother's story, it's theirs. And they then become friends.

Elizabeth Newman has written a book entitled *Untamed Hospitality* where she asks Christians to protect this radical concept of hospitality. "Protect it," she says, "because there are other forms of hospitality that, while they are great, and while we love them, they aren't as rich and they aren't as deep." Quickly she has three, particularly. She talks about sentimental hospitality, that Henry Nowen describes as "tea parties, bland conversation, and that general atmosphere of coziness." I think of it as being in a ski lodge by the fire. I like it there. It doesn't mean that it's hospitality. She talks about privatized hospitality, sort of like Harriet Beecher Stowe says when we know to be hospitable in some places, such as when we're grilling for our friends in the back yard. But hospitality is when we are hospitable in our very being, when we have a presence of welcome wherever that stranger might find us. And finally, Newman says, we need to be cautious that we don't substitute our Christian hospitality for marketed hospitality. We aren't Starbucks and we aren't the Pottery Barn, but we are in likeness to it, creating a warmth of community.

In fact, the word hospitality comes from the Latin word *hospid*, but it has very strong Christian roots. In the medieval time period of the pilgrimages, there were times when people would get sick on the road. There were times when people just needed to rest, and so they created these hostels, a place where you could find other people from around Europe, and you could connect with them. Today, those are the words that we get in the

word hospital and hospice, hostel, it's a place of rest, a place of welcoming the stranger. It is a place of laughter as well.

Some of you may have heard recently, in the last couple of years, a story of J. Dobbins. He played football for the University of Arizona, he's married with two kids, he's a churchgoer, but he also is a federal agent. He was asked to infiltrate Hells Angels and to bring in some indictments on people. It was sixteen months that he was in that community. It was very scary. His story is very interesting to read. But a couple years ago when he finished his book, I heard him on the radio on NPR and the interviewer said to him, "Is there anything that changed you in the sixteen months that you were with this group?" And he said, "You know, I've been in a lot of groups in my life. I've played football, on football teams, I've always gone to church. I have a strong family," he said, "but in the middle of the sixteen months, I had to leave for a family funeral, and when I came back, those men welcomed me with bear hugs, and they sat me down and wanted to hear the depth of my sorrow." He said, "I was really taken by the fact that sometimes I don't always think we know what community is."

The Benedictine nun Joan Chidester says something very similar. She says living together does not in and of itself create community. People can live together in armies, prisons, college dorms and hospitals, without ever creating community. What we have to do is create it when we look for the good for one another, and when we live for and how we intend to live out the values that will value those people in community. As Christians we are always called to extend the hand, to ask, "Are you new here?" But more than that is to ask the question, "What is your story? May we share the story? May we be a part of a deeper community of faith?"

There's a book that's going around, all the ministers are reading it, some of you have probably read it, it's called *Five Practices of a Fruitful Congregation*, and one of the chapters in there is radical hospitality. It defines radical hospitality as the way we actively invite, welcome, and care for those who are strangers. It's the stranger. We're pretty good at being friendly. You know who you know. But the challenge is, who is the stranger in your midst, and who is God in the midst of that stranger?