

Radical Hospitality
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The Unitarian Church in Summit
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Reading:

“Preparing a Table,” from “Radical Hospitality” by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt

Uncle Stan dies in Cleveland and you find yourself sitting at a table with cousins you haven't seen in years and great-uncles you did not even remember. The death is a sad thing, but there at the table during lunch you hear stories about your dad. You hear how your parents met. Someone remembers the time you visited cousin Linda and cried to go home to your mother, but Linda is gracious enough not to mention you were a big, strong boy of eleven at the time.

The table is a place where you connect and belong. It is a place where the past remains alive in the memory of the very old, and the future sparkles with possibility. It is enchanted. We lean close together, we share a glass, we tell a story. Through this simple human relating, the universe feels as though it is right again, even after Uncle Stan has gone on to whatever comes next.

We all have memories of tables prepared for us and those we have readied for others. Some of the memories are from childhood. Others are memories of good friends, of falling in love, or of deep connection with another human being. Meals are powerful symbols in our memory. But someone has to make a meal happen. Someone must consider it important enough to give themselves to the work that goes into preparation.

Setting a table and making ready for a meal involves preliminary thought and consideration for others. To do it right you have to think through your guest's preferences and history; you need to know if they have allergies or chronic illnesses. If you invite more than one guest, you must consider which of them would enjoy sitting together and how they might relate. Preparing for another pulls us out of ourselves – that is one of the good gifts of hospitality.

Meditation:

Today is the weekend before Thanksgiving, and it is Transgender Day of Awareness, and so we call to mind the places that make us welcome, and those who have needed and not always found such places.

I was once the stranger, and so were you. Walking into a room knowing no one. Maybe it was a church, an office, our first day of school, the playground, the 12-step meeting that would save our lives. And someone reached out. Someone made those places safe. Months later, we'd

walk in with folks to wave to, eager to catch up, growing in our friendships. Each of us would make the other's world a little larger. A little richer. A little dearer.

Who welcomed us? Who made the world safer, new places warm places, who assumed we were worth their time of day before we had a chance to prove it, because they were the people who never needed or wanted proof?

Who looked into our eyes when we were hurting and listened? Who heard us when we needed to be heard and seen because that made us feel human again? Who reached across the abyss of separation, even for a moment, even if we never saw them again, to remind us we were not alone?

And who needs our listening, love, and hand across the abyss now?

We give thanks for the love that made a place for us, the people who made the world safer and kinder, and the chance to do the same.

Sermon:

As many of you are no doubt tired of hearing, I spent the summers from 9 years of age onward at my aunt and uncle's home in upstate New York. There they ran a bed and breakfast and restaurant overlooking Lake Cayuga. My aunt would see to most of the details of the décor and the menus. My uncle would run the business side, place the orders, fix the roof when lightning struck.

Nancy was a natural at hospitality. Her mother practiced it flawlessly, and so had her grandmother. To the women in their family, setting a table and preparing the way for guests was an art. Everything was always beautifully laid out, and when you arrived, you were welcomed like royalty with huge smiles and hugs and a sense that they had waited and prepared for you all day – which, of course, they had.

One afternoon, trying to show how much she had taught me, I laid out cups and saucers, spoons and napkins, freshly baked cookies. I hand-picked wildflowers from around the house and placed them on the table in the kitchen, and invited Nancy and my mother, who was visiting, and my cousins to the table so we could have tea. Everyone came and appropriately oohed and aahed over the table I had set. Then someone asked for milk for their tea, which I had forgotten to put on the table, so I rushed over and put it out – a big plastic gallon jug. “Vanessa,” Nancy shrieked as she burst into laughter, “have I taught you nothing?!” I ran back and got the porcelain creamer, filled it with milk and rectified my wrong!

Hospitality, for Nancy, was an art – an art about details, about beauty, about a welcoming that was communicated in a table and in a smile. It was about time and space carved out to be present to your guest and make him or her feel special, fully alive, loved.

The art that Nancy passed on is older than her grandmother. It is age old, *ages old*. It has deep roots in many places, including the Middle East, where our own Jewish and Christian heritage and teachings sprang up. In Bedouin culture, it has long been the custom to welcome the stranger, forbidden as you are from even asking his name. You welcome him, and then are obligated to feed and offer him rest and protection for three days, though he may in fact be your enemy.

English explorer Wilfred Thessiger, who traveled across the deserts of Arabia, once saw his Bedouin guides welcome a man in tattered clothing with such reverence that he later asked them about their treatment of him. The man, it turned out, was revered for his practice of hospitality.

“Once,” says Thessiger’s guide, “he was one of the richest men in the tribe, now he has nothing except a few goats.” I asked: “What happened to his camels? Did raiders take them, or did they die of disease?” and bin Kabina [his guide] answered, “No. His generosity ruined him. No one ever came to his tents but he killed a camel to feed them. By God, he is generous!” I could hear the envy in his voice. [*Wilfred Thessiger, “Arabian Sands,” E.P. Dutton and Company Inc., 1959, pp.56-7.*]

Imagine generosity and hospitality to the point of ruin, and people who revere you for it. This is the world that helped shape our own. It is this ethic of hospitality that has pineapples adorning colonial furniture and door knockers and needlework. Pineapples, a sign of an exotic fruit which, when it was lavished on you as a guest, showed the hosts had literally spared no expense to make your night with them memorable. It is the pot of coffee we put on when someone arrives, like the *Dullah*, or coffee pot, the Bedouin always had cooking on their fires, waiting for the unseen guest to appear over the horizon.

We value hospitality. We have inherited that value. Even our own denominational program to prepare congregations to be more open and affirming to folks who are gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual recalls us to this age-old ethic. We who have gone through it are “A Welcoming Congregation.” It is great marketing, because who would want to be anything but that?

Already we can see, of course, that hospitality is more than just a table that is set. In Latin, the word *companion* literally means to “break bread” together. Hospitality, then, is all that we do to prepare for and welcome the guest. Food, yes, to show we want their needs taken care of, but the welcome at the door too. And even more than that.

Father Daniel Homan is a Benedictine monk. Benedict, in the rules he set out for his monks, made welcoming the stranger a mandate, something to keep them open to the world and the work that welcoming such folks would require. At Father Homan’s monastery in Oxford, Mich., they lived rather *too* cloistered for decades. Then, one year, they welcomed back a brother who had done work in youth ministry in Chicago and who proposed they turn an old barn into a center for youth.

It was 1975 and the barn was old and had no infrastructure. Turning the barn into a place where youths could come for retreats meant lots of changes and sacrifices. First, the barn had to be made into a habitable place, with showers and bathrooms and rooms for sleeping. Just as challenging was that these monks – who were, for the most part, self-proclaimed introverts – had to prepare to welcome the youths. They had to prepare to share meals with them, to have them present on the grounds, breaking the silence with the sounds of laughter and conversation, and open to all the struggles these youths would bring with them to this place.

Benedict knew that when you prepare a place for people at your table, *even just that* begins to change you. Then when you sit and eat with them, *again* you are changed. He was right, and the monks in the Oxford monastery were about to be changed.

[The choir sings the refrain from “Draw the Circle Wide” by Mark A. Miller and Gordon Light:

*Draw the circle, draw the circle wide,
Draw the circle, draw the circle wide,
No one stands alone, we’ll stand side by side.
Draw the circle, draw the circle wide.]*

“It is always easier to care for the world, to care for all the others,” wrote Homan and his co-author, an active laywoman who serves at the monastery too. “It is always easier to care for the world, to care for all the others from a distance. We can even feel good about our prayers for them as long as the people are not in our space and are not taking up emotional space in our hearts. They become harder to handle when they show up and expect something from us.” (p.84).

But show up they did. By 2002, 80,000 youths had gone through the gates into the monastery. There they had been welcomed, tended to, and listened to in the way the monks are trained to attentively listen – to see and attend to the divinity in each child. So it isn’t surprising that some of the youths would show up on the grounds during times of trouble, with households exploding beneath them.

“Not long ago,” the monks recalled, “[we] found a young woman in their chapel who had been on retreat at the monastery in her teens. It turned out that she had gone into the dark, empty retreat house the night before and slept. Like many adults she had gone home for the holidays. But the difference with her was that her mother didn’t want her home.” Over the years, she told them, unbeknownst to the monks, this young girl would come and sit on the rocks by the gates to the entrance to the grounds when things got bad, and in her family they got bad a lot. So, when things fell apart, she went to the one place she knew would welcome her.

Other youths returned to have their weddings performed by the fathers, and later their babies blessed. Looking for cloistered lives, the fathers opened the monastery and a world of turmoil, searching, beauty and deep connection took hold of them; 80,000 lives invited to change their own.

Father Homan wrote: “Merely being nice to people does not fulfill the deep requirements of Benedictine hospitality. We must let the person stir us; we must connect. Benedictine hospitality will extract a cost from us, and it will tumble us into the magical realm of personal transformation.”

I think sometimes we mistakenly think otherwise. I think we mistakenly assume that if we warmly welcome someone, doing our job as a good host at the door, that their job as a good guest is to become one of us. This means that their job is to figure out how we do things and, except for minor tinkering, leave behind what *of them* doesn't fit the mold we've made.

I'll admit I'm guilty of that. When new people arrive here asking us to change, I can sometimes feel defensive or protective of who and what we are. And I will cut myself some deep slack too. Our job in life is to love one another first, because asking for change without love is what is called “conditional love” and we reject that.

Still, welcome a deaf visitor, as a colleague of mine did years ago, and you may be on the brink of a deaf ministry with sign language interpreters at worship, and then at meetings, and you are changed by them. Welcome a neighbor who is Chinese-American, or Indian-American, or Puerto Rican-American and there are cultural legacies important to them, and cultural ways of being that will soon enough be important to you, and you will be changed by them. If you are a congregation of largely straight folks and you welcome gay and lesbian folks, and make room for the transgendered guest, or, say, hire an assistant minister who brings her partner, and moves here and joins her life with yours, you will hear stories of a world very similar to the one you walk through, and also *completely different*, and it will shake you awake in new ways and *you will be changed*.

When we welcome people, radically hospitable, listening with our hearts for who they are and inviting all of it; when we invite people, some of whom have no safe places in their world – when we do *that*, that kind of radical hospitality, we will be changed. How could it be otherwise?

[Choir sings the refrain of “Draw the Circle Wide.”]

To close, I want to share a story that my colleague Lee Bluemel shared with me years ago (much of the language is Lee's). It took place in a small Catholic village in Poland just before the Second World War. A Quaker woman came to the village. She was a nurse, and since there were no other nurses in that village, she stayed for a while, doing what nurses do – bringing babies into the world, caring for the sick, setting broken bones, and tending to the dying.

Well, one year in the village turned into two and two into 10. Babies became men, women became mothers, mothers became matriarchs, and everyone knew and loved the woman who first came as a stranger to their town. Then, one day many, many years after she first came to the village, the Quaker woman died.

The whole village grieved and prepared for her funeral, but their grief was made more acute when it was revealed to them that as a Quaker, she would not – could not – be buried in the only cemetery in town because it was for Catholics only. It was illegal to bury her there.

Talking among themselves, they decided to do the only thing they could think of. They buried her just outside the walls of the cemetery. At least they could visit her there, though it didn't sit quite right.

And so they buried her, and night fell and all was quiet but for the strange noises heard coming from the cemetery: the noise of stone against stone and labored breathing. It was the noise of a wall being moved. By morning, the local Catholic cemetery had grown a little larger, though no one admitted knowing how. Everyone was relieved, however, because now *inside its walls* was the grave of the woman they loved.

People change us when we let them in, in ways we can never anticipate when they arrive. Our job is to prepare a way.

So, brothers and sisters, place a pineapple on your doorstep. Set your tables this Thursday and all days for welcoming. Prepare the meal knowing we companion those we break bread with. Pour coffee, remembering the men in the desert who gave everything to do right by the stranger. Put your milk in the creamer, calling to mind the ones who taught you how to love this way. And go to the door prepared to meet royalty, soul greeting soul, with a smile, a ready embrace, and the knowledge that you will change one another.

Remember that *real hospitality*, radical hospitality, is not something we do, says Father Homan, but someone we become.

So may we practice it with all our hearts. Amen.

[Choir and congregation sing refrain from "Draw the Circle Wide."]