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Trinity Episcopal Church

Genesis 22:1 – 14
Romans 6:12 – 23

Psalm 13
Matthew 10: 40 – 42

“Talk over...different ways to make new friends and keep old friends.”

“Explain some rules of etiquette and show how they are based on consideration of the other person.”

“List things you should think of and do as an overnight hostess and as a guest. Compare lists.”

“Practice making introductions correctly...discuss ways to make newcomers feel at ease.”

“Learn how to write: [a] thank you note for a gift or a visit; [a] friendly letter to a sick person. Know the parts of a letter...”

“Put on a skit showing courteous telephone manners.”

“Set a table for two kinds of meals and explain the importance of good table manners.”

“Discuss how to choose gifts for: [a] family birthday, [a] ...holiday party.”

“Using new ideas and skills learned, plan and serve simple refreshments or give a party for your parents, patrol or other group of friends.”

During my vacation last week, I was having a good clean-out at the house, re-organizing and recycling unneeded stuff to Habitat or whoever. In one of the boxes were my Girl Scout handbooks: Brownie, Junior and Cadet. I flipped through them, remembering with some surprise just how many creative ideas and practical life-lessons they contained.

As I flipped through the Junior book (grades 4 – 6), I came across a badge that I had earned: the “Hospitality” badge. The requirements were what I just read to you. The purpose of the badge was “to learn how to be an even better friend, a courteous guest and a thoughtful hostess.”

Hospitality doesn’t seem to carry a lot of weight in our culture any more, or at best it’s somewhat clichéd. Perhaps the first association we have when we hear the word ‘hospitality’ is “Martha Stewart,” and we think of someone having the perfect, spotless and stylish house, or the perfect gourmet meal. Like almost anything else, what is considered good hospitality is a product of its time and place. Just the other night at Book Club, we were laughing at the remembrance of trays placed in the front hall to receive calling cards of visitors. But hospitality is so much more than these ‘white glove’ images of tea cakes and floral arrangements. And some aspects of hospitality – welcoming and receiving, making and being a friend, expressing gratitude, and respecting others to name a few – never go “out of style.” They are intrinsic to what it means to be a Child of God.

Hospitality is a basic Christian – and Jewish and Islamic – virtue which though essential, isn’t splashy or headline grabbing or heroic. However, hospitality is what, in today’s reading from Matthew, Jesus urges us, his disciples, to practice. I think Jesus would be very happy with the requirements of the Girl Scouts badge, at least as a place to begin.

As an aside, while hospitality seems less important to us, to Jesus’ culture, a desert culture, hospitality is a matter of life and death. Jesus’ culture is also an honor-shame culture, and one cannot afford to lose face by being inhospitable. So much of Scripture is filled with stories that, at their core, revolve around the issue of hospitality. Think Jael and Sisera, Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Sarah at the Oaks of Mamre.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me,” Jesus says. That’s a pretty amazing thing for Jesus to say. Jesus is a strong proponent of agency, meaning that the disciple who goes out in Jesus’ name is not just a ‘representative’ of Jesus, but an actual agent, an extension of Jesus’ own being and authority. It’s similar, perhaps, to someone exercising Power-of-Attorney authority in our culture. In other words, when someone encounters one of Jesus’ disciples, it should be as if they are actually encountering Jesus. “In the name of” is a Semitic idiom or expression meaning “because one is.” So, if one of Jesus’ disciples, say Peter or James (or you or me) goes forth ‘in the name of Jesus,’ it is the same as saying that they (or we) *are* Jesus. We are the Jesus that other people will experience.

That’s why hospitality is so very important - so that we can welcome and receive others as we have already been welcomed and received by Jesus. Our ministry of hospitality exhibits to others not only who we are as followers of Jesus but who Jesus is. It also shows the power of the Gospel to change our lives and to change the world. As one writer [H. K. Ohmig, *Synthesis*, June 29, 2008] puts it, “Our level of commitment, our willingness to be transformed by the Spirit – what we stand for and how we stand for it – validates Christianity in the world.”

Jesus invites, encourages, urges, commands us to perform acts of hospitality – actions that speak louder than our mere words. We are to welcome the stranger and do something as simple as proffering a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty. So often we wonder what we can do to live into our faith in Jesus more fully, and here is Jesus telling us that it is as simple as practicing random acts of kindness – or what the Rev. William Willimon refers to as “deeply merciful acts of kindness and grace that reveal to others the reign of Christ in our world.”

Hospitality is important and perhaps is getting more so every day in our world. Despite our global connectivity – or perhaps increasingly because of it – we are a world full of strangers. And we seem bound and determined to build walls, metaphorically and otherwise, that create “US” and “THEM.” Instead of embracing our diversity, we are learning to fear and distrust “the other.” We do indeed live in a world filled with terrorism and violence. There *are* people who seek to harm others. But should their thoughts and actions determine how we respond? Jesus’ answer is the cross - a loud, vigorous and faithful “NO.”

A ministry of hospitality has always involved some measure of risk. Jesus’ radical openness to ‘the other’ – the leper, the foreigner, the tax collector – and his willingness to have table fellowship with them is one of the reasons that he is despised by the Temple leadership. Jesus welcomes those whom the leaders won’t: the unclean, the fallen, the stranger. It isn’t any different in today’s world. Sometimes, even offering a cup of cold water can be a courageous and risky act – take for instance those who are leaving jugs of water in the desert for people crossing the border illegally from Central America and Mexico.

Many of you contribute to the discretionary funds that Steve and I have. Those monies enable us to be hospitable to people who come looking for assistance – we’re able to provide food, or to keep the lights on, or to buy gas to get to a doctor’s appointment. And, as the Church, the Body of Christ, we do it ‘in the name of’ Jesus. We do it, again as the Rev. William Willimon writes, ‘not because we have determined that they are “really sincere” in their need, or that they are members of the “deserving poor,” [whatever that might mean]. We do it because that’s what Jesus teaches us to do and commands us to do – to welcome the stranger and to give a cup of cold water. Your generosity, your ‘deeply meaningful acts of kindness and grace,’ enable us to reveal something of Jesus to a hurting world. And

in this rough and tumble, hurting and sometimes uncaring world, where many receive nothing but rejection and pain, it might be the only Jesus that they ever see. But it might just be enough.

One of the things that is implied, but not necessarily so obvious about what Jesus is saying in today's lesson is that Jesus intends the Good News to be spread, not as some set of propositions or a creed or a catechism, but as relationship. Welcoming the stranger, offering a cup of water - Jesus wants us to *love* people into the kingdom with right actions, not *persuade* them with right thinking. The power of the Spirit is to be caught more than taught. And then this wonderful chain reaction happens when we serve others out of our love for Jesus. When we give a cup of water to someone, it's as if we are giving it to Jesus himself. And if we're doing it for Jesus, then we're doing it for God.

Jesus calls us to be very intentional about how we follow him, how we make him manifest in this world. In the midst of this often-inhospitable world, a world that can kick people to the curb time and again, we are called to be kind and generous, welcoming and merciful, caring and loving, no matter what the cost. And when we live into that, we give the world little glimpses of how God has created the world to be, and how it shall one day be again. The next time we are able to perform an act of kindness for someone, may we find a way to let them know that we are doing it as followers of Jesus. Not so that we can earn some spiritual merit badge, but because we know that we are deeply loved and we want to pay it forward and love others.

In the words, once again of William Willimon, let us pray:

Lord, help us to open our door to those in need. You know us, Lord. We fear those who are different from us. We are suspicious of the stranger. We don't want to be used.

However, you have urged us to show hospitality, to welcome others, to give a cup of cold water in your name.

Lord, prod us out beyond our closed doors [and hearts]. Give us the courage to reach out in your name to those in need. You have given us so much. help us to share what you have given us with those who have less.

Remind us that we were strangers to God's love. We were outside of the promises of God to Israel and you invited us in. As you have opened your door to us, as you have welcomed us, help us to show hospitality, even as you have shown hospitality to us. Amen. +