

Welcome Home, Welcome All
September 10, 2023
Mark 2:13-17
Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church
Grand Rapids MI

“Best night ever! Even better than Christmas.” Those were the joyful words I heard uttered just last night as Amy and Laura returned from the block party we attended down the street. I had left early to work on the sermon while they stayed till the end. Now for two introverts to say that after spending four hours with a large crowd of people they don’t know very well is huge. Last year the block party started off a little rocky for us. We never got an invitation and were at home watching tv when we noticed fire truck lights outside. We stepped out and saw that they were there for the kids and were running the water gun. It looked fun, but we never got an invite, so we weren’t sure if it was a kid’s birthday or what. We were content to watch from a distance when one of the adults started waving for us over. It took quite a bit of coaxing for us to finally agree to go. We met some people and came away wondering if this is what it is like to be part of a neighborhood.

This year, when we got the invitation in our mailbox, we got excited. We joined the crowd, had a good time, even met our mailman who came back to join the party at the end of his shift.

So, when you are new to a place, how do you know if you will fit in?

Especially in a place that is well established like a neighborhood, and you are the new kid on the block. It takes true hospitality or what some would call neighborliness to make that shift from stranger to neighbor.

I have been reading a book called *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian tradition*. by Christine D. Pohl. In the beginning of the book, she recounts the clear and often practiced mandate of extending hospitality to strangers found in the Bible. Stories like Abraham and Sarah visited by four strangers, Lot when he risks his life by taking in two strangers, Elijah taken in by the widow and given her last measure of flour and oil for food, just to name a few. There is even a clear command from the Moses as the Israelites were entering the Promised Land, “you shall not oppress a stranger, you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Ex. 23:9 (p. 28). Pohl goes onto highlight how this is mandated as a spiritual practice in Jesus’ ministry. As we read in our first reading this morning, it becomes a praised aspect of the early church. This gift of hospitality was not one way either. Jesus often accepted the hospitality of others, like we see in today’s Gospel reading when he eats with Levi and his friends. But Jesus also sends the disciples out with no provisions instructing them to receive hospitality from strangers for everything they needed to survive, including lodging.

In the book I found this quote quite compelling. “Philip Hallie, an ethicist who spent years studying the human capacity for evil and good, concluded that “the opposite of cruelty is not simply freedom from the cruel relationships, it is hospitality.”

Pohl, the book’s author, goes on to underscore this with her own observed research of hospitable communities. She says, “these communities offer hospitality in the context of larger environments that are often inhospitable to certain kinds of strangers and indifferent to their needs. Rather than being overwhelmed by the heartlessness and by the need, these

communities of hospitality understand their welcome to strangers as “little moves against destructiveness.”

In today’s Gospel reading on the surface, it may appear like Jesus is just getting slighted for dining with an unsavory crowd by the pharisee’s standards of holiness. But hearing Jesus’ response makes me wonder if Jesus saw it as much more, even lifesaving. It is interesting that Jesus compares his simple act of dining with tax collectors and sinners to being a physician attending the sick. He is at home among a group of people that the Pharisees not only refused to eat with, but also labeled as depraved, instructing others to not associate with them either. To do so could mark you as unclean and cast out of the synagogue. They were judging them and judging Jesus for being with them. Their words were cruel, not hospitable and everyone in that room probably heard it. But they also heard Jesus’ response defending his right, even his calling to be at that table. He was called to save lives.

We don’t always look at hospitality to strangers as that, but in ancient times it often was a life saving act. Still today, we often praise people who take steps to welcome in people when disaster hits. Noting that tomorrow is the Anniversary of 9/11 reminded me of the ways that hospitality in the face of fear and terrorism was a stark reminder of the power of love over hate for us in the days following those attacks. The musical *Come From Away* is a wonderful story of a small town’s efforts to welcome hundreds of passengers with open arms. It changed the town and the people from the plane also. It addressed people’s fears of strangers, and shifted people’s perspective about the world.

Hospitality, true hospitality happens when people are generous, vulnerable and kind. Not just with things, but with their hearts also. When we learn to accommodate the needs of others, listen when they tell us what barriers they have experienced and work together to remove those barriers we benefit also. We build community and we express love for those that others may have rejected.

Today on our welcome Sunday let this be a time of renewed commitment to pay attention to the needs of others and seek ways to expand our welcome to others, especially those that society has rejected. Let us do our part to be good hosts and offer love and friendship to all we meet. Let us be observant for those non-verbal cues that tell us that someone feels rejected or put down by the cruel words or actions of others and stand up for them too.

The calling of the church to be a community of hospitality, love and connection is still our calling today. Don't let us take on the false piety of the pharisees and look down on others that don't look like us, sound like us or believe like us. God loves all equally and so should we. Remember cruel people are seeking to destroy those they are being cruel toward and want others to join in. Jesus spoke up and said "no, I am here to heal."

So I leave you with the closing words from our first reading:

"Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God."