

## Radical Hospitality

Jamaica Plain, August 27, 2006, Karl Haakonsen

In the Bible, the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (referred to as the Canaanite woman in today's reading from Matthew) has been interpreted in a number of ways. In one interpretation that I happen to like, it's a satirical slap in the face at the disciples' own prejudices. From the book, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible* by Douglas Adams - no relation to the Douglas Adams who wrote *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* - "In the first part of the chapter, the disciples did not understand Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees; and Jesus was trying to help the disciples develop a broader viewpoint.

"In Matthew 15:23, just before the conversation between Jesus and the woman, the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' So we see the disciples next to Jesus as he and the woman talk. Jesus' words may be a satirical expression of the disciples' own prejudices, a humor the woman understands as she responds in kind."

In a homily delivered by Chris Walton at King's Chapel a couple of years ago, he used the phrase, "expanding one's moral imagination" when talking about the version of this passage in the Gospel of Mark, which was the lectionary text for that day.

The larger point being that we tend to go through our lives allowing only those people who are like us into our hearts, and thus worthy of our attention and our compassion.

Last spring, Cherisse and I attended a Learning Congregation Workshop put on by the Mass. Bay District of the Unitarian Universalist Association with a title something like, "Welcoming as a Spiritual Practice." Upon arrival, one of the materials we received was this little book entitled "Radical Hospitality." Now, I've heard the catchphrase 'Radical

Hospitality' bandied about in the context of congregational growth, vis-à-vis welcoming the stranger into our congregation and the need to be more welcoming to newcomers.

Sometime this summer after Cherisse and I came back from attending General Assembly, the annual convention, meeting and celebration of the Unitarian Universalist Association, after I'd read the books I bought at General Assembly, one of which was almost used as the topic for this sermon, I picked up this little book to read it. The first thing I noticed was the subtitle, "Benedict's Way of Love." This was not something published by the congregational growth team at the UUA.

When I began reading the book, it became clear that what was being promoted was radical indeed. It's not about something you do, or about making sure that you talk to the stranger at coffee hour; it's about a way of being in the world that is radically different from the way people in our society usually are in the world.

Quoting from this book,

Our closest relationships are built on what we share and have in common. We build relationships at work, school, church, and in our neighborhoods. We meet people while we serve on the board of some local charity or in a service club. Thus, we form a social sphere of people who are like us and do not feel like actual strangers. The problem with this manner of forming relationships is that we may exclude those who are not like us. We don't exclude them intentionally, but our worlds tend to be small and homogenous. We don't go looking to be made uncomfortable.

As a spiritual discipline, Benedict understood the importance of encountering those who are different from ourselves because it stretches us; it dislocates stiffness and opens us up to new possibilities. He meant for the monks to do so intentionally.

When we create a life surrounded by people just like ourselves, it is a very narrow life. We cave in on ourselves; our minds and spirits shrink to the pea-size of our world. A

spirituality centered in such a life will drift into laziness and complacency. It is the kind of life that allows us to settle for easy answers based solely on personal experience. Letting ourselves believe that our experience constitutes normality and that other ways of doing life are abnormal is delusional and dangerous.

Anyone who walks around our city much gets accosted often by people begging for money. One afternoon, after spending the day working at a client's office downtown, I was walking back the entrance to the State Street subway station on the corner of Devonshire and Water Streets, and in the stairway lurked a homeless man looking quite disheveled and not very coherent... I was in a hurry to get home, and having had a lot of time between contracts, not feeling particularly generous or willing to part with money.... Or maybe I didn't have any small bills I could give the man... or whatever. We've all experienced this before, and even the most compassionate among us has had a hard heart (or empty wallet) once in a while. But what struck me about myself after I made it through the new Charlie Ticket readers to the southbound Orange Line platform was that I deliberately pretended not to notice the man.

I imagine that many of you here have done this too, hoping not to be noticed so as not to be asked for money. But what struck me later was how the man must have felt... to have someone walk past him in this fairly desolate entrance that used to be an exit-only portal before the installation of the Charlie ticket readers.... And not even acknowledge his presence. I was ashamed by this more than my lack of generosity. By pretending to be invisible myself, I made the man invisible. This isn't practicing radical hospitality. I vowed that I would not ignore anyone, even if I had no money to give them, I would regard them as human beings worthy of being acknowledged. Still, I sometimes catch myself with my instinct to try to become invisible at these moments. It is something I will struggle with as a spiritual exercise.

Radical Hospitality tells us,

Suspicion is one of the enemies of hospitality. Fear is at the core of suspicion. We are all starved for love, yet we are mostly unwilling to trust others to give us what we need. We grow callous and hesitant from the fear, always waiting for the other shoe to drop, ever sure of the next rejection. So we keep people at a distance with suspicion and fear. We fear not only rejection and harm, we fear being trapped by love. We fear we will give too much of ourselves and receive nothing or little in return.

Of course, one doesn't need a stranger to practice radical hospitality. Internalizing the concept of opening your heart to others and being present with them in their space can enhance the relationships you have as well as be spiritually transforming whether you're talking to a newcomer at coffee hour, or listening to someone you've known a long time tell you about their troubles, or passing a homeless person on the street.

Quoting another passage from Radical Hospitality,

Hospitality means we don't tell people how to feel. We listen to them. We let them tell us how they feel. This is not easy for a compassionate person to do. We stir up the pot of our own emotion and experience, and the result is what I feel. How I would respond. How I would behave.

When someone dies, we naturally feel compassion for the loss. When we hear that someone's children have made choices that seem painful for the parents, we assume the parent is suffering. These are not negative assumptions. But, in relating to the person, we must offer them room to feel what they feel, rather than assuming that we know how they feel. Even if we think that we have been through exactly the same experience ourselves, we cannot know what another is feeling. Every person brings to an event their unique history and personality. You can assume that every parent who loses a child in an auto accident is grieving, but you can't know what that grief feels like for the parent. You only know if you offer an open space in yourself for them to pour out their feelings.

The passage Cherisse read from Radical Hospitality said, "You make room for one person at a time, and each of these choices of the heart stretches your ability to receive others."

It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus practiced radical hospitality; he consorted with people from all walks of society, and he paid attention to everybody, treating even the lowliest with respect and dignity. He healed the outcast with a mere touch. Miracle or not, one can't argue with the value that just touching a person whom society has shunned would have great healing potential. He dared to get close to people throughout his ministry. It wasn't enough just to give charity to the poor, but one must let the stranger into your heart; to love one's neighbor as oneself, as the Good Samaritan did to the robbed traveler.

I'll conclude with this passage from Radical Hospitality,

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 not taking up emotional space in our hearts. They become harder to handle when they show up and expect something from us.

The hardest thing about all these people is their absolute otherliness, which cannot be tamed or ignored. They are going to remain unlike us. We are not going to understand them.

We should celebrate this. We need them to be different from us. It fits the way the universe has been designed.

We don't have to make a choice about how we will respond to others, as long as they stay on their side of the fence. In the wilderness of relationships, we contend with powers we'd rather not ever meet up with. We will keep opening the door, and keep making an attempt, and then one night will find us in some holy place and in a holy moment that snatches the breath away.

Readings:

From Matthew 15:21-28

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

From Radical Hospitality, by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt

Hospitality, rather than being something you achieve, is something you enter. It is an adventure that takes you where you never dreamed of going. It is not something you do, as much as it is someone you become. You try and you fail. You try again. You make room for one person at a time, and each of these choices of the heart stretches your ability to receive others. This is how we grow more hospitable - by welcoming one person when the opportunity is given to you.

From Luke 14:7-23

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,'

and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. "

Benediction:

Today's culture is increasingly hostile and suspicious toward anyone who appears to be different - especially when tragedy strikes. Our instinct is to bolt our doors and protect

the ones we love. But deep within the heart of Benedictine spirituality lies a remedy to hatred, fear and suspicion: hospitality.