

The Harvest is Plenty

By
The Reverend Rebecca Kirkpatrick
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Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 18:1-8

¹⁸ The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

¹⁰ After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³ Go on your way; I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ ⁶ And if a person of peace is there, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ ¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹ ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’

When I was in high school, I participated in a trip to Malawi, Africa as a part of a partner relationship that still exists today between Pittsburgh Presbytery and the Synod of Blantyre in Malawi. I was one of three teenagers in a group of about 50 adults who were sent from Pittsburgh for a three-week trip to work, fellowship, and worship alongside our partner churches, schools, and hospitals there.

Unlike the preparations we might do today for a trip like that - internet research, emails, Zoom calls, and Google Drive, etc. We were prepared for that mission work over the course of 4 Saturday morning long training events and a three-inch binder to teach us about the culture and history of

Malawi, our partnership values, what to pack and how to prepare, and then the actual work that we would be doing there.

The experience over all was one of the most formative moments in my personal life and in my calling to mission and ministry - both because of the experiences I had in forming relationships with our partners in Malawi and the relationships I developed with all of these other adults who were giving three weeks of their summer to this work as well.

I was a part of a small choir that blended with a larger Malawian choir that performed throughout the Blantyre area for three weeks. On Sundays, they would send us out in pairs to more far-flung congregations to worship, bring greetings from Presbyterians in the United States, and build relationships.

For all the things I learned at those training events, it wasn't until I was in the midst of these visits that I really understood the purpose of our "mission" and what it means to be a guest in a mission context.

One Sunday, my partner and I left worship and were taken to the home of one of the church's elders. As we approached the house, we walked past rows of mud bricks drying in the sun, and then were treated to a demonstration by the women of the household on how they grind maize in a large mortar to make the signature Malawian dish of nsima. When we entered the thatched house and sat on the dirt floor together, we were then offered the traditional drink given to guests and shared at celebrations - Thobwa - again a maize-based delicacy in Malawi that has a milky appearance, a cereal taste, and a slightly grainy texture.

As soon as I held it in my hand, I realized it was warm, and my little 17-year-old self started to silently panic. I did not want to drink it. I wasn't sure I could drink it. In any other context in my life to that point, I would have declined - thank you so much, but I am not really thirsty, is what my well-trained manners and my mother had conditioned me to say when I didn't want something offered to me.

And yet only by the grace of God did maybe something from those long pre-trip trainings come to mind or the spirit of God itself came over me, but I distinctly remember something clicking in my brain that compelled me to suck it up, drink as much of it as I could as gracefully as I could so as to not offend our hosts.

While I have had countless experiences like this in the years since, this is the first moment in my life that I truly understood the role of hospitality in the work of mission.

Our text for today, only found in the Gospel of Luke, is essentially a training manual for a group of 70 disciples of Jesus who are being sent out into the world in "mission" to prepare communities and households for the coming of Jesus of Nazareth to their towns.

This passage is packed with all kinds of metaphors and instructions, so many that while it comes off here as a short pep talk before these seventy missionaries hit the road, I can only imagine this must just be a summary of at least 4 Saturday morning training sessions as well.

Jesus expresses the need for their work, the abundant harvest opportunities, and potential for the world that awaits them. But he also

cautions them that the work will be hard and that they may, in more ways than one, be vulnerable and at risk. Even though they will be endowed with the power to do miraculous things, they will be like lambs in the midst of wolves.

But instead of giving them a packing list of all the things they will need to do their work and keep them safe, he gives them a kind of anti-packing list - no money, no bag, no sandals, no food. To do this important and powerful work, they will be reliant upon the hospitality and generosity of their hosts. And because of that, they are instructed to always be generous and gracious guests.

Theologian Elaine Heath describes the reason behind these strange orientation instructions in this way: “The hospitality of the 70 is shown in their mission of peace, in which they eschew all forms of exploitation, self-centeredness, and personal gain. Their single purpose is to prepare others to encounter Jesus. This is done peacefully through grateful presence and conversation. The apostles must be relational and respectful in order to be invited into others' homes, where they might share the gospel of the Kingdom of God . Theirs is a vulnerable position, for they cannot force receptivity or hospitality on the part of others. The apostles must be willing to go without food, shelter, or welcome, for the sake of the gospel.”

There is this remarkable dicotomy in this text - that these disciples are given power in their work - to heal the sick, to cast our demons, to call people to be open to the message of the Gospel, and yet they are required to take on a posture of dependance and powerlessness in how they go about this work. Jesus knows that to give these disciples this kind of

power will necessitate a countermeasure of humility, allowing them to wield that power with grace and peace.

The essentialness of hospitality is a consistent theme throughout scripture, with the passage that we just heard from Genesis held up as one of the most iconic. Abraham entertaining, welcoming, caring for angels; welcoming messengers from God with gracious acts of hospitality. Abraham's instinct towards hospitality meant that he didn't even need to know that these visitors were divine. He treated them with the same generosity and welcome that he would any passerby.

A recent example of how we connect mission and hospitality is evident in the ways we have hosted our Code Blue shelter here at the church over the past two winters. On the cold nights in January when the temperatures drop below freezing, volunteers sit in the Atrium through the night, ready to offer hospitality to guests who need shelter from the elements. Volunteers go out of their way to welcome guests as they enter into our building in exactly the same way we welcome guests to our church on Sunday mornings, or even more so, how we welcome people into our own homes.

It is a recognition of the vulnerability experienced by our guests out in the world. Their willingness to trust that this is a safe place for them is no small thing. I love it when I overhear a volunteer say to a guest, "We are so glad that you are here tonight." It is an intentional corrective to the ways that almost every other space in our community is inhospitable or even hostile to their presence.

This is the power of hospitality.

But what is happening here in the Gospel of Luke is in some ways the opposite, and it pushes us to consider how often we allow ourselves to not just welcome the vulnerable guest, but to become that dependent guest as part of being disciples of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago a small group of us traveled to Lebanon and Syria to visit with Presbyterians there who were doing the work of educating and caring for Syrian refugees as well as the internally displaced. But another aspect of that trip was to visit homes that had been destroyed in the conflict and then rebuilt through the work of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

We spent that entire trip on the receiving end of hospitality. I don't think anything happens in Syria without a cup of tea being offered, and so we drank cup after cup of tea offered and sampled from every plate of cookies and sweets set before us. It was especially moving when we were able to be guests in the homes of those who had recently returned to their rebuilt homes and apartments and listened to their stories of disaster and a kind of resurrection.

A member of our group pulled me aside after one of these visits to share his concern that our visits were placing a burden on these families who were still trying to reclaim their lives and financial stability in a continually challenging environment. To be clear, there are moments when people like us go out into the world in mission and are more of an inconvenience and burden than a help. He suggested that we offer to reimburse all of these families for the expense of the tea and cookies that we had consumed.

In the gentlest way possible, we talked about the fact that we, a group of well-off Americans, were there because our affluent church had given a gift of \$75,000 to the Synod of Syria and Lebanon, and our affluent denomination had invested half a million dollars to help rebuild homes in their community. And so as a way to counterbalance all of the power that we held in that moment, we humbled ourselves, sat in their modest living rooms around their propane heaters, and received their hospitality. The dignity of being a host in that moment was the most gracious way we could connect with these people whose lives and experiences were so different than ours.

Just as these seventy disciples were sent out by Jesus stripped of all of the worldly things they could rely upon, and ate and drank everything that was put before them, we were in a feeble way attempting to live into the same spirit of those instructions.

In his book Unreasonable Hospitality, restaurateur Will Guidara, of the renowned NY restaurant Eleven Madison Park writes about the power of incredibly intentional hospitality, how going above and beyond to make people feel seen and valued isn't just good service—it's a way of life, reminding us that true hospitality creates space for connection, joy, and transformation. It is packed full of aphorisms to think about hospitality, management, and human connection.

My favorite one is this: how you do one thing *is how you do everything*. In other words, if you have a certain value in your work or in your community, it needs to be reflected in everything you do, or rather, it doesn't matter if almost everything reflects a certain value; if it isn't infused into all things, it doesn't count. Or more likely, that relentlessly

sticking to certain values in one aspect of our work leads to that value becoming reflected in all of our work.

The example he gives, in their relentless pursuit of unreasonable hospitality at Eleven Madison Park was the way in which the tables were set each night - each plate placed at each seat in a precise way, so that if a guest sat down and flipped the plate upside down to see the maker's mark, that the Limoge logo would be right side up. He writes, "we found over and over that precision in the smallest of details translated into precision in bigger ones. By asking the person setting the dining room to place each plate with total concentration and focus, we were asking them to set the tone for how they would do everything over the course of the service - how they would greet our guests, how they would walk through the dining room, communicate with colleagues, pour the champagne to begin a meal and the cup of coffee to end it."

The message that we can take away from these odd and counterintuitive instructions that Jesus gives to his disciples as they venture out into the world is that it reminds them and reminds us that the way we do one thing is the way we do everything. In directing these 70 missionaries to humble themselves, shed the things that gave them personal security and stability, to take on a self-imposed vulnerability, he was teaching them how to do all things in his name - offering signs of peace, a humility of spirit, and a message of hope.

The work that we do in mission in almost all ways looks different than the healing and acts of power that Jesus sent these followers out to do in his name, but the posture in which we do it remains the same - a spirit of vulnerability and graciousness.

But we don't just engage in mission in this way because it helps us to form and grow relationships with people whose lives and experiences are so different than ours. We go out beyond these walls in this posture because it shapes the ways we return as well. Just as these missionaries returned in joy, rejoicing in the ways that their lives, their faith, and the world were transformed by their works of power and their practices of vulnerability, so too are we called to allow these same values of peace, graciousness and dependence on others to be reflected in every aspect of our life together as a church.

How we do one thing is how we do everything with graciousness, peace and a willingness to be vulnerable and dependent on each other: each time we welcome a new family into our community, each time we teach a child that they are beloved by God, each time we encourage a teenager to consider how their lives can be lived in service to others, each time we walk along side our friends through illness and grief, each time we share table fellowship with one another, each time we create music and art to the glory of God, each time we give out of our abundance - each of these acts of mission and ministry become reflections of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, who came to this world in peace, the divine guest, holding together power and vulnerability in ways that continue to transform us and the world today.

Amen.