

BOLD HOSPITALITY

As we conclude our series on Stewardship we want to look at one final aspect of managing the good gifts God has given to us. Hospitality is an important part of ministering to others with what we have.

If you watch *Corner Gas*, Canada's only homegrown successful sit-com, you know how the characters feel about Woolerton. *Corner Gas* is set in the fictional town of Dog River, named so because a farmer once drowned his dog in the river. The neighboring and rival community of Woolerton causes such disgust in the mouths of the Dog River residents that they all collectively spit whenever the name "Woolerton" is mentioned.

Who knows what causes such a bitter response to the mention of this town? Though it may not be unlike how Kleefelders feel about Grunthal or New Bothwell. I remember how some of the long time residents of Kleefeld spoke of these rival towns and nearly spit the names. What causes such unhappy memories in Dog River and Kleefeld hearts?

My theory is that an individual in one of these rival towns was inhospitable to a visitor from Dog River and left a sour impression. One person acted rudely or answered sarcastically and left an impression that this town was full of such people. One person representing the entire town treated the visitor, not like a guest, but like an interloper, an unwanted and intrusive busybody. And that was enough to leave a bad name on the whole community. Woolerton (spit); Grunthal (spit); New Bothwell (spit).

Hospitality makes all the difference. It can soften the heart, refresh the guest after a weary trip, and restore joy to the unappreciated and so much more. Is there a theological foundation for the practice of hospitality? Of course, the Bible even speaks of hospitality as a major gift of the Spirit.

Within the story Jesus tells of the Friend at Midnight we see a powerful example and model of hospitality.

1. Can you imagine...

We want to focus on the four verses in the middle of our passage this morning. Luke 11:5-8 is the story of a friend who comes at midnight requesting bread for his surprise guest. Let's look at the important elements of this story.

Jesus begins his story by saying, "**Suppose one of you has a friend...**" (v. 5). This is an interesting opener which suggests that it is a hypothetical story; it's not true but is intended to provoke a certain reaction.

The same Greek phrasing is used elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke. In 14:5, Jesus says, "**If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?**" Again in 15:4 Jesus says, "**Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?**"

In all three stories there is a similar response expected from the listening audience. The latter two stories could be translated as "Can any one among you imagine a son falling in the well and not immediately pulling him up on the Sabbath day?" And "Can any one among you imagine having a hundred sheep and having lost one of them, not leaving the ninety-nine in the wilderness and going after the one that is lost?"

So here we must also have this in mind: "Can you imagine having a friend and going to him with the sacred request to help you entertain a guest, and then he offers silly excuses about sleeping children and barred doors?" And the answer is the same in every case: NO!! The Middle Eastern listener would react with shock and knowing his responsibility to be hospitable answer "No I cannot imagine it."

It is unthinkable to refuse anyone hospitality in the Palestinian mindset. People of the Middle East are legendary for their ability to show hospitality in any situation. In fact, the excuses that the

sleeper gives are so ridiculous they would have made Jesus' audience laugh. Big deal! The bar on the door isn't that heavy. Big deal! The children will fall back to sleep again.

So when Jesus asks if they can imagine a situation like this we must understand that to refuse hospitality in this context is unthinkable.

2. The Request

The situation is unusual but not improbable. A friend arrives at midnight and the custom is to feed him whether he is hungry or not. But there is no food in the house, we assume. So "...he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him'" (v. 5-6).

The fact is he may have a broken loaf or two, some leftovers of some kind, and a half jug of wine. But that will not do when you have a guest over. It was insulting to offer anything but a whole loaf of bread. Our host asks for three because it was also customary to offer more than the guest could eat, even though he only needed one loaf. The guest would take that loaf, break a piece off and dip it into the bowls of meat or sauce and eat it. Bread acted as the fork, knife, and spoon for the eater. Double-dipping was not appropriate, thus a whole loaf was needed to provide enough pieces to dip with.

In communities like these it was obvious to everyone who had recently baked bread. Our host knew that the sleeping friend had bread and comes to him for that necessity. The sleeper knows that the host will be going house to house to gather the other parts of the meal. Bread was the sleeper's to give and it must be given.

In these two verses we have the request (bread), the reason for the request (a friend has arrived), and an appeal to duty (I need to feed him). Underlying this story is the understanding that the visitor is not just the guest of the individual, but is a guest of the community. It is not the individual who is honored by the visit of this guest but the community. Thus the community is responsible for his entertainment. "The guest must leave the village with a good feeling about the hospitality of the village as a community" (Kenneth E. Bailey; Poet and Peasant).

3. A question of Honor

We know the request and we know the initial answer; the sleeper says no to the request. But why does he change his mind? We read this, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs" (v. 8).

The impression we get from our translations of this verse is that the sleeper eventually gives in because of the boldness or persistence of the host. According to Kenneth Bailey we have a mistranslation of the word we know as "boldness" and have also applied the word to the wrong man.

Translators have tried to put a positive spin on a negative word and so we have "boldness" or "persistence" or even "shameless persistence." But these are inadequate substitutions for the word Jesus intended. The word he used was "shamelessness" and it does not apply to the host but to the sleeper. In other words, it is an avoidance of shame that compels the sleeping man to get up and help this friend. There is no indication that the host is persistent; he simply asks for bread. Persistence or boldness was never applied to this word in the first century. It is all about the honor of the man with the bread.

The sleeper knows that the borrower must gather up the food for his guest's meal from various neighbors. If the sleeper refuses to give the bread that was requested the host would continue to the other neighbors and gossip about how stingy the sleeper had been. By morning the story would be all over the village. He would be shamed by his neighbors. So to avoid this public shaming he will get up and give the host whatever he wants.

This reading has a better flow. "...though (the sleeper) will not get up and give (the borrower) the bread because (the borrower) is (the sleeper's) friend, yet because of the (sleeper's) (shamelessness / honor) (the sleeper) will get up and give (the borrower) as much as (the borrower) needs." It will also make more sense theologically later on.

4. How do we apply this?

What are we to learn about hospitality from this story Jesus tells?

a) The nature of God – Why does Jesus tell the story? One major theme we see in this story is an application of who God is. God is a God of honor and a God of hospitality.

If we return to the context of what Jesus said, we can see that this story follows his teaching on how to pray. Jesus wants his disciples to understand God's attitude towards their efforts in prayer.

Think of the story in this way: When you go to this kind of a neighbor everything is against you. It is midnight and an inappropriate time to be asking for anything. He is asleep in bed and the door is locked with the children sleeping. He doesn't like you and yet when it is all said and done, you will get what you asked for. This is because the man you are asking for bread from is a man of honor and he will not want to damage that reputation.

Now think of God. The God to whom you pray is a God of honor and a God of hospitality, a reputation he will not go against. And besides this, unlike the sleeping man, God loves you.

b) Our assurance – A second important theme draws out of this first. If you can go to a neighbor like this and have your needs met, how much more confident can you be when you go to our Heavenly Father and ask for things?

Here then is why the word "boldness" or "persistence" does not fit the story. Though it is true that we can approach the throne of grace with confidence, this is not what the passage is teaching. If persistence in prayer is what Jesus is teaching then we get a very questionable teaching. The sleeper said 'no' to the borrower. What we conclude then is that when God says 'no' to us we are to persist as if to change his mind. After all, we know better than God what we need. Is God deaf? Does he need his arm twisted? Does he want us to bargain with him? Of course not.

Jesus said to pray like this: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation" (11:2-4). And God who is a God of honor will grant our requests. God who is a God of hospitality will not make us beg but will welcome us into his home of blessing. We have this assurance that God will meet our needs.

c) Duty to community – Out of this model of hospitality that God displays we learn to show hospitality to others. If we want to live Godly lives, to show the character of Christ to others, then we need to imitate his heart.

When Jesus was invited to a dinner put on by a Pharisee, he had much to say. On hospitality Jesus said this, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

There are many reasons for us to show hospitality. One reason that our original story made clear was that we have a duty to our community. What we do as individuals reflects on the community of Kleefeld as a whole. What we do as people connected to this community of faith says a lot about all of us as a church. When a visitor comes to our church building for a worship service, how many invitations do they receive for lunch before they walk out our doors?

Inviting people over to our homes is not solely to provide them a meal. What it does is offer them an opportunity to see our faith at work. So if a visitor comes to KEMC and they are invited to dinner they have a chance to see Jesus in us. Our aim then is to make them feel comfortable and important because that is how God sees them.

But who are the poor, crippled, lame, blind and so on? There are those who are poorer than us and some are who not well. The lame and the blind could be seen metaphorically. These are the people who may not have Christ and need us as friends to show them Christ. Our goal here too is not to convert them, though we hope they will believe in Christ, but to befriend them and love them as God does.

d) Unexpected blessings – Who are we entertaining when we bring strangers into our homes? We hope that we will be inviting strangers to become friends. But there may be further blessings we are unaware of.

Hebrews 13:2 reminds us of an exciting prospect when showing hospitality. The writer of Hebrews said, “**Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.**” What a thrilling experience that would be if we were observant enough to realize it.

Even so, Jesus makes it clear that there is a greater presence to be aware of in showing hospitality. Remember Jesus’ words, “**...I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me**” (Mt 25:40). When we show hospitality to those outside our circle of friends and family we are entertaining Christ himself.

A funny thing occurred when I was searching for illustrations for hospitality...there were none. So I Googled the word “hospitality” and all I got were job opportunities in the hotel industry. Well wouldn’t it be great if our guests felt like they were treated with such royalty that they thought they were at a resort.

To be welcomed, loved and entertained in an appropriate manner fills the soul with such comfort and wipes away the tensions of our fast paced lives. It does our hearts good too, to stop and do something for others that requires only opening our homes and our hearts to those of the broken variety.

Our honor compels us to show this hospitality out of love for our God and respect for the community of faith.

AMEN