

Lenten Devotional

2012

Hospitality



Foreword

It's hard to believe that this is our eleventh annual Lenten Devotional Booklet. I chose "Hospitality" for our theme this year, in alignment with our church-wide theme.

Once again, the meditations submitted are thoughtful, beautiful, and heartfelt writings. What a treasure you all are! We have 30 selections this year, the most articles ever! We also have some new authors, so please thank all who submitted stories and poems when you see them.

Many thanks to Kathy Henry for running copies in the church office and thanks to the Congregational Care Ministry and other volunteers for help with collating.

Much technical assistance from my husband, Bill, is always deeply appreciated. You would think that I would know how to put together this booklet on the computer by now, but I remain technically challenged (it's that right brain, left brain thing).

I have been told that these Lenten Devotional Booklets are used as daily readings before breakfast or supper, and sometimes kept on a nightstand for reading before bed. Others have told me that they quickly read through the booklet in one sitting as soon as they receive it and then re-read the selections throughout Lent. However you choose to use the booklet, I hope it will be a blessing to you through the 40 days of Lent and beyond.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Decker

Chairperson of Lenten Devotional Booklet

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Holding a Space Open for God

Rick King

I remember when the call came during a busy work day at the church. It was just about Christmas Day 2005, and the church secretary took a message that a young woman from Kenya was arriving in town in a few days to begin studies at Winona State University, and needed a place to stay until she found an apartment.

Now, mind you, it was late December in Minnesota—25 below, snowy and windy—not exactly Nairobi-friendly weather! But I took the message and starting wracking my brain trying to think of members of the congregation who had spare rooms and might put her up for a stretch. I also called other churches in town, extending the network as widely as I could. I called my wife, Linda, to see if she had any ideas in the community. She said, “Why don’t we? I could clean out the spare room of my sewing stuff, and she could stay there.”

Mercy was her name, and she arrived on schedule, and, yes, she had the heaviest clothing on that she owned—and she was still shivering! We moved her in with her single suitcase full of things, and she settled in that Sunday afternoon and had dinner with us that night.

Mercy ended up staying for two months. We gave her rides to class, took her shopping, brought her to church. She developed contacts in town with a charismatic church that was more familiar to her, and before too long, she found an apartment in town and moved out.

But what happened in that two months was that a deep friendship was formed that continued well into the spring. In the summer, she transferred to Mankato State, for two sisters of hers had arrived and were attending that university and were living in that town.

We still know where she is, and we stay in touch with her on Facebook. There were several visits, meals, laughter and stories, and we eventually met her parents and had them over to our house in Winona.

When we make room for a stranger because “It’s the right thing to do,” we hold open a space for God, and receive great gifts in the process

Scripture: 2 Kings 4:8-17

8One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. 9She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. 10Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.” 11One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. 12He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. 13He said to him, “Say to her, Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” 14He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” 15He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. 16He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.” 17The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.

How are you?

Luke Grobe

The question, “How are you?” is something that we say many times daily, but how often do we actually want to hear an answer besides, “Fine.” or “Good.”

How often do we respond to someone who asks us that same question simply by saying, “Fine.” or “Good.” even when we are riled in turmoil?

How hospitable are we being in either position?

When we ask the rote question and expect the typical response are we communicating that we do not in fact care? When we respond with the typical answers when someone asks us the rote question are we communicating that we do not in fact want to welcome that person into our lives?

It seems as though in our hectic world of rushing from one activity to another that we have lost focus on a simple act of caring for each other. Yes, when crisis arises we respond immediately with prayers, delivered meals, visits and phone calls, but being hospitable is not only responding to crisis. We must also be welcoming interaction about the little needs in life too.

When someone asks you, “How are you?” I hope that you will welcome them into your life and actually tell them. This will invite them to share about their life as well. It should not be a burden, but rather a thrill to be invited into a deeper part of someone’s life.

The OUR (Outreach United Resource) Hospitality Center – Food and Fellowship for Those in Need

Edwina Salazar

Since 1986, the OUR Center's mission has been to provide people with basic need services that accurately reflect their need and provide opportunities to move toward long-term change. The OUR Hospitality Center was created from the true and simple love for people a short time after the founding of the Center. It has become a home during the day for anyone who otherwise would be left needy, hungry, weary, lonely or living on the streets.

OUR Hospitality Center's food programs are the most vital link in the safety net in the Longmont area. Two hot meals (breakfast and lunch) are served per day to up to 400 persons. An average of 65 households per day receives groceries from the Food Pantry. Often, the meals and groceries provided at the Hospitality Center are the first steps to connecting with more comprehensive services such as homelessness prevention and Day Shelter services. The Center not only serves food to persons who are homeless but to those experiencing a housing crisis. Many people have found that a way to preserve their housing is to cut their food budgets by eating at least one free meal per day and obtaining groceries from the Food Pantry.

Over and above the direct provision of food, the Hospitality Center is a place of fellowship - a place which provides a doorway through which guests can find the support they need to survive during a crisis. They find themselves in a safe, stable and accepting environment with a support system of volunteers from communities of faith and each other. They find friendship and companionship through informal guest support groups. They care about and uplift one another while receiving meals and services from compassionate volunteers.

The communities of faith volunteering at the Hospitality Center find that the Center can be an instrument of God's love by serving people in need. The OUR Hospitality Center began as a coalition of citizens, faith communities, and service organizations

seeking to provide a place of hospitality for our neighbors in need. We retain these roots as resource for our neighbors... a place they can feel safe and welcome.

The Hospitality Center is the fulfillment of Hebrews 13:2, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Scripture: Luke 14:12-14 - “Then Jesus said to his host, “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 and 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.”

Entertaining Angels Unaware

Anne Kear

It was one of the worst blizzards of the winter. It descended on northern Ohio without warning on the Saturday our church planned its annual fish fry with Lake Erie perch. People came from miles around. Some of the committee was already in the kitchen preparing at 1:00, when the storm began. They decided to postpone the fish fry to a later date.

As they prepared to leave the church, a bus with students from Ohio Northern University, who had been at nearby Heidelberg College for a volleyball tournament, stopped in front of the church. They couldn't go on because visibility was near zero. Could they stay at the church? "Of course," was the answer, "but let's get you something to eat." Soon several cars stopped in the church parking lot with others on their way back to Ohio Northern University. Even the chaplain of the university was there with a carload of students.

The two people from our church who had not yet left the church and lived in town invited them all into the fellowship hall and began preparations to feed them. They called other members of the church who lived in town; soon a group of people began meal preparation for 40 people. Some of the food prepared for the fish fry was brought out. The members from town emptied their freezers and refrigerators and brought more food. The little grocery across the road from the church supplied more. Soon all were eating a warm meal together.

Then all began to talk about where everyone would stay for the night because the roads were closed and the storm promised to continue until the morrow. Church members who lived in town took people home with them. Some slept on the church pews. Everyone was provided for.

Later the chaplain wrote to me, the pastor who had been safely at home 20 miles away when all this occurred, "We are so grateful for the hospitality extended by members of Trinity Church. You folks are truly followers of Christ who extended hospitality to

strangers on the road who were in need.”

Prayer suggestions: Remember a time in your life when someone unexpected extended hospitality to you. Meditate on that time, the person or persons and give God thanks.

Scripture: Hebrews 13:1,2 “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Opening Ourselves and Receiving the Stranger

Carol Matheis-Kraft

In about 1995, I visited First Congregational UCC, looking for a church home. Before, during and after the service no one talked to me! Needless to say I did not return for five years. Because of the church's open and affirming value, I tried again in 2000. What a difference 5 years made.

Environment, values, mission, and attitudes all determine if a place is hospitable or not. Hospitality is not just being friendly to people you know. It means an openness; it means being readily receptive to strangers.

Our value and mission of hospitality translates into name tags, friendship pads, blue mugs for visitors, front porch visits or cookie trays, using a microphone while speaking in church, greeters, passing of the peace, ramps, automatic doors, large print bulletins, and printed sermons. All these things make a difference.

But in the end, it is that personal connection that keeps people coming back. Someone who belonged opened themselves and received the stranger in God's name.

Prayer - Holy One, Aid us to be open and receptive to the stranger.
Give us open arms in welcome in your name. Amen

Hospitality

Diane Groff

If someone would have told me that I would be spending a week of my summer vacation, pedaling my bike across the hot, humid, and hilly state of Iowa for 20 years, I would have rolled my eyes and said, “Yeah, right!”. Well, Don and I are going to experience our 21st Bike Ride across the state of Iowa, RAGBRAI... with over 10,000 cyclists during the last full week of July. Last year, our experience was complete with a mandatory tornado evacuation on our very first night out! Why, oh why are we doing our 21st year of riding in such conditions??? There are many other locations to explore! Besides the fact that we always wrap in a family reunion as Don is from Iowa, it is the hospitality extended to all the riders that makes the RAGBRAI experience so special. The local economy gets a huge boost when 10,000 riders come cycling through and in need of refreshments, a place to stay, or a cool place to hang out. The ‘red carpet’ is literally rolled out and you can strike up a conversation with anyone. (Railroad crossings are often covered in carpeting for ease of crossing on a bike! Now that is hospitality to a touring cyclist!)

Don’s birthday often occurs during RAGBRAI and we honor it by making sure his palette dictates our food choices. One year, on Don’s birthday, he was hoping to eat a cantaloupe for a refreshing snack in the morning. We pedaled into a very small town, with one small independent grocery store. It had three aisles, wooden floors and no cantaloupe. Nor did any of the food vendors set up outside have any for sale. Right next to where we put our bikes, a lady wearing a hair net with curlers smiled at us. We said hi and asked her if she lived here, which she confirmed. After exchanging a few pleasantries, we asked her if she knew of any other vendor options that might sell cantaloupes. Her eyes brightened and she grabbed my arm and said, “I have two cold cantaloupes in my refrigerator, and I live right above the beauty shop and can bring them to you! I made

a fruit salad for a family reunion and these are left over.” Before we could say anything, off she went, on a mission to share her treasures. It was truly an Oasis in July in Iowa.

She brought out the two cold cantaloupes, a knife and two spoons. Wow! It was such a treat, and thanks to her hospitality, we cut open the fruit, cleaned out the seeds and set out to share the cantaloupes with other riders. It was such a sweet, sweet gift and fun to watch her smile as other riders thanked her too. Several years later, Don and I pedaled through that same small town. We pedaled up to her apartment door, and there she was, taking in all the fun again. We shared a great hug and recalled the specialness of our first encounter. Hospitality brought us together, especially when offered in joy and enthusiasm.

Scripture: Luke 6:31 - “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Mother Nature's Hospitality

Emma Cloe Creighton

With open arms she never turns away.

Her fertile lands and crystal waters beckon you to stay.

In her embrace, you may find a home.

Of grass, in rock, of wood, in stone.

Rooms for every little ant or bee.

To the biggest fish or hulking bear.

Mother nature offers us her hospitality.

Please, treat her with care.

Grace in Pajamas

Erin Angel

My eyes snap open. There it is again, pounding on the door. Who is pounding on the door at 6:15 am? My husband is at work, but his stern caution has me ready for a home invasion. I need to get to the door before my imprudent eight-year-old answers it. I clutch an eight-pound weight in my hand figuring it could at least stun the intruder.

I crack open my door to find a sobbing boy clutching a chihuahua to his chest. “Oh Buddy, que paso - what happened?” I haven’t seen this kid in years, not since before he and Liam started kindergarten. I don’t know if he still speaks Spanish or if he knows English now. “My grandpa went to work and my uncle had to go someplace and I was alone and I was scared and I came HEEERE!” he wailed. Nonplussed, I have him come in.

He is a lot bigger than Liam, almost as big as me, but he clearly feels like a very small boy right now. He and his chihuahua are very upset. I ask him to remind me of his name again as I sit him on the sofa and ask him if he wants some milk. God, I need coffee for this. As he calms down he pets his dog who is trembling in fright. I am glad the chihuahua is okay. When they first came to the door, I thought maybe the dog had been hurt or something. Sad boy we can deal with.

I go upstairs to wake Liam from his sound sleep. I whisper, “Do you remember Johann? The boy who used to stay with the people next door sometimes?” Liam shakes his head no, but pops right up when I say that he is downstairs and a little scared and he needs us to take care of him for a while until his grandpa gets home.

With pajamaed grace he goes downstairs and immediately and gently engages this new friend/stranger in play. His eight-year-old compassion fills me with admiration and wonder. Grace is something neither his dad nor I possess and I ponder its origins in Liam as I fix the boys breakfast.

Hours pass by and our family's plans are put on hold as the boys build Legos and race HotWheels. I see no additional cars drive in the driveway next door and I wonder where the grandpa or uncle may be. I ponder how this boy who had barely spoken to us, had just heard our halting spanglish greetings years ago, knew to come here. I keep an eye on the cowering three-pound chihuahua and try to keep my 17-pound cat from eating him. Their antics entertain me.

Around lunchtime there is another knock on the door. The young uncle explained that he'd gone for a run and when he came back he saw a note that Johann was next door. He knew he'd be alright, so just left him here to play. But now it's time for them to go run some errands.

Prayer: "God, thank you for using children to teach us grace and hospitality. Let us learn from their free and open example. Help me to ever be open to helping our neighbors. Help me to gracefully set aside my personal agenda and reservations to make room for others."

Receiving Hospitality

John Creighton

Have you ever been so overwhelmed by hospitality that it scared you?

In the early 1980's, my friend Brad and I rode our bicycles through southwest Missouri, northwest Arkansas, northeast Oklahoma and southeast Kansas. We were just 18.

The Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks are not the most hospitable terrain for cyclists – especially in August. The mountains are hills by Colorado standards but the summer humidity is suffocating. The shoulder-less roads were narrow and clogged with tractor-trailers traveling to and from nearby poultry farms. More than a few times, we were blown into the ditch by a passing semi rig.

The people in that part of the country weren't accustomed to cyclists, either – at least not in the early 1980's. Brad and I were often rebuffed with a stiff “dunno” and a skeptical glance over the shoulder when we asked locals in various small towns where would be a good place to pitch a tent.

We became so accustomed to the cold shoulder treatment that we didn't bother asking anyone for help when we arrived, after a long day of riding, in Gravette, Arkansas. We sat on the parking lot curb of the local grocery store sipping water and eating candy bars when Dean walked up.

“Are you from Atwood, Kansas,” Dean asked, nodding at the Atwood Centennial t-shirt I was wearing that day. “Yea,” I replied with my hand shielding my eyes as I looked up toward Dean and into the still blazing sun. “My brother's from Oberlin (the next town east of Atwood on Highway 36),” he replied with enthusiasm.

We had the type of conversation people have when they discover a geographic connection, recounting well-known landmarks and businesses and asking about surnames to see if we knew any in common. Dean quizzed us on why we were in Arkansas, where we'd been, where we were headed next and then proclaimed, “Pitch your tents in our yard tonight.”

That sounded okay to us. At least, at first it did. As we followed his pick-up truck on our bicycles for a good thirty minutes into the hills outside Gravette, we began to get nervous. We had no cell phones in those days. The only payphone within miles was back at the grocery store we just left. We couldn't contact family or friends.

We were riding into remote Arkansas with a complete stranger. The worst scenes from horror movies began to take shape in our minds. Our uneasiness mounted when we arrived at Dean's home.

"I was thinking on the way out here there's no need for you to pitch a tent. You can roll those sleeping bags out on our living room floor," Dean said matter of fact. We had no desire to sleep in a stranger's home. Brad and I uttered together the only words that came to our minds, "Okay."

We settled uncomfortably onto Dean's couch after he introduced us to his wife Mary and one of his three boys – the older two were still in town. Mary acted as if she'd been expecting us all along. She said a quick hello and then headed into the kitchen. Dean and his son left the living room, too.

Brad and I sat in silence. Tired. Concerned. Wondering what in the world we'd gotten ourselves into. Dean and Mary came back to the living room about 30 minutes later. They had both changed clothes and it looked as though Dean had just slicked back his hair.

"We were talking," Dean announced. "You're going to sleep in the boys' room tonight. We don't want guests sleeping on the floor." Brad and I desperately wanted to say, "We'd feel a lot more comfortable in our tents outside – preferably back in town." Instead, we replied, "Okay."

"We made some chicken for you," Mary said. "Please eat as much as you can."

"We'll see you later," Dean added casually. "We've got Bible study tonight." And just like that, Brad and I sat alone at a stranger's table with a plate of chicken piled nearly a foot high. We ate... a lot. (We were 18.) But, we were scared. Why were these strangers being so nice?

It was nearly two hours before Dean, Mary and their three boys returned from church. Brad and I had come up with a plan in their absence. Before a conversation could get started we made a pre-emptive strike to ward off more hospitality.

“We usually try to get started riding at sunrise,” we said. We really need to get to sleep.” “That sounds fine,” Dean replied. “The boys’ room is right down the hall.”

Brad and I didn’t get much sleep that night. The twin beds squeaked with even the slightest movement. We didn’t want to draw attention to ourselves. We lay on our backs, staring at the ceiling, desperately hoping for morning to come.

Sleep eventually overtook us as it often does. And, we woke with a start when Dean banged on the door. “It’s almost daybreak, boys,” he called.

We dressed quickly with hopes of departing straight away. Mary had other ideas. The kitchen table was already covered with a large bowl of biscuits and another of gravy. We ate, a lot, and tried our best to make conversation as the last remnants of morning darkness held on interminably long.

As the first rays of sunlight filled the morning sky, we asserted that it was time for us to go. (This would be the earliest we hit the road on this trip by more than two hours.) Dean, Mary and all three boys joined us on their driveway. They did their best to assist us as we reattached side bags and sleeping bags to our bikes.

Dean and Mary stood arm-in-arm as we rode away. The three boys stood by their sides without showing even a hint of annoyance that two strange cyclists forced them to rise before dawn because their parents insisted that they say good-bye.

I would like to say Brad and I felt grateful for the abundance of hospitality we received. Eventually, a few weeks or, maybe, years later I think we did. At that moment, though, I regret to say, we mostly felt free.

“Thanks for staying. Be safe,” Dean called out as we topped the first hill and slid out of sight.

Romans 13:2 encourages us to offer hospitality to strangers. There’s another side to that coin. We need to be open to receiving hospitality, too. There may be angels willing to support us if we only give them a chance.

Father, Can I Please Come Home?

Linda Dipman

His brown curly hair fell wispily to his shoulders and caressed the sides of his beard and mustache. His dark eyebrows were arched slightly and his eyes shone with a brilliant light of love. A glimmer of white teeth flashed as his mouth curled up in a smile. Jesus was stylishly dressed and the anticipation of the moment was making His heart beat wildly with excitement. He had come home to share with His family and friends the Good News.

But when He arrived, He questioned if it was possible to go Home, “Father, can I please come home?” He asked.

Jesus had just come from Galilee where they had warmly received His teachings and the wonderful miracles of healings He performed. His family heard about what happened and they requested He come home.

Luke 4: 16-21: “Then Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.’

Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him, as he said to them, ‘This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.’”

Jesus was excited to share the news that He was the long awaited Messiah. Instead the people only saw Him as the son of Joseph. He had come home to skepticism and ridicule from His hometown.

Luke 4:24-30: “‘I tell you this,’ Jesus added, ‘a prophet is never welcomed in his hometown. Listen to me: it is true that there

were many widows in Israel during the time of Elijah, when there was no rain for three and a half years and a severe famine spread throughout the whole land. Yet Elijah was not sent to anyone in Israel, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the territory of Sidon. And there were many people suffering from a dreaded skin disease who lived in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha; yet not one of them was healed, but only Naaman the Syrian.’

When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were filled with anger. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of town, and took him to the top of the hill on which their town was built. They meant to throw him over the cliff, but He walked through the middle of the crowd and went his way.”

Jesus felt the pain of their rejection, but it did not diminish His determination to be the Savior of the World. He came to bring a new kind of teaching that focused on love and not judgment. Nazareth would no longer be His home. His home would be with the people who believed in Him. Together they would make a new home in the realm of Heaven.

Luke 6: 22&23: “‘Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and say that you are evil, all because of the Son of Man! Be glad when that happens and dance for joy, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven. For their ancestors did the very same things to the prophets.’”

As Jesus’ ministry grew, people flocked to Him. He spoke with an authority they had never heard before. He taught them about love and how to get along with each other. He taught them about forgiveness and acceptance for each other. His teachings touched the depths of their souls and many came to believe that He was the Messiah.

The Pharisees were jealous of Jesus and they plotted to kill Him. Yet even when Jesus knew about their plans He continued to teach the people. He healed the sick. He cast out demons. He fed the hungry. Many thousands were baptized and placed their faith in Him.

The Pharisees did everything possible to stop the people

from believing in Jesus. They persecuted the believers by threatening to throw them out of the temple. They plotted to kill Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead. Some of the Pharisees believed in Jesus but they were so afraid of the Sanhedrin that they hid their faith for fear of being excommunicated.

Luke 14: 26&27: ““Whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than he loves his father and his mother, his wife and his children his brothers and his sisters, and himself as well. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.””

Throughout history the simple fact that following Jesus would lead to persecution became a badge of honor to His disciples. They were Christian soldiers fighting for Jesus Christ. They were people who knew that to follow Christ was to give up their earthly homes.

Hebrews 11:33-38: “Through faith they fought whole countries and won. They did what was right and received what God had promised. They shut the mouths of lions, put out fierce fires, escaped being killed by the sword. They were weak, but became strong: they were mighty in battle and defeated the armies of foreigners. Through faith women received their dead relatives raised back to life.

Others, refusing to accept freedom, died under torture in order to be raised to a better life. Some were mocked and whipped, and others were put in chains and taken off to prison. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword. They went around clothed in skins of sheep or goats-poor, persecuted, and mistreated. The world was not good enough for them! They wandered like refugees in the deserts and hills, living in caves and holes in the ground.”

“Father, can I please come home?” Jesus knew that Nazareth could never be His home. He made a choice to die on the cross to save people. He became the risen Savior. His home would never be here!

“Father, can I please come home?” Jesus called out to His Father in Heaven.

God answered. “Yes!”

Hebrews 12:1&2, “As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God’s throne.”

“Father, can I please come home?” cried the children of Jesus Christ. They ran the race which God had planned for their lives. They fulfilled their life purpose. They never gave up and now they are ready to claim Heaven as their home.

With a resounding voice God answered. “Yes!”

“Father, can I please come home?” the people asked.

Jesus replied. “Throw open the gates of heaven and let my people come home!”

Revelations 21:3: “I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: ‘Now God’s home is with mankind! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God.’”

What a Difference a Smile Makes!

Linda Petitt

When you work in retail and deal with the public constantly, it is commonplace to greet people who pass by with a smile or a verbal acknowledgment. One seldom believes that addressing another person will make any major difference. It is just a courtesy, isn't it?

A couple nights a week, I had the closing duties in the produce department. If I had all the non-refrigerated items filled the night before, the morning person would have a much easier job having the whole department looking fresh and well-stocked. So I would heap up the apples and oranges and the onions and the potatoes.

One evening, an elderly woman was shopping near me. I greeted her and asked her how she was doing. Expecting a short response, I was surprised when she began describing some recent medical problems. I just listened. She seemed to need someone to talk to.

The following week, she returned and sought me out. I told her we could visit, but I would have to work while we talked. So she followed me around from one area to the next. I learned she had no children and she had recently retired from working many, many years at a local restaurant.

We visited nearly every week for several months. She shared her concerns as well as her joys and I could count on her showing up. I remember the night she came into the store and another person was with her. She seemed really excited to be able to introduce me to her niece. She wanted her family to meet her friend.

I guess one never knows just how important a smile and a "hello" might be. And that is one of the easiest, most natural expressions of hospitality one can practice! All I had to do was to be present.

Prayer: Loving God, Help me to remember to try to be a living example of your love. Help me remember that a touch or a smile or just being there can make all the difference in the world to someone who is all alone. Amen.

That's Just How New Yorkers Are

Erin Angel

“Invalid PIN.” What? How could it be invalid? Maybe I’d just messed up the numbers. No, “Invalid PIN” comes up again. I remove my card to check it. I hadn’t used it in months. I hadn’t needed it in the Northern Maine wilderness. Oh Crap. My heart sinks as I realize my card expired two weeks ago. While I was guiding trips in the backcountry I’d had no mailing address.

I’m sick, I’m in New York City and I have eight dollars. I had my paycheck, though. Pro-rated. If you can’t tough out illness as a guide, you go home - wherever that is. You don’t get paid for weeks you don’t work. Still, it was \$2,000 dollars. I didn’t want to carry around that much cash, but I guessed I had to. There is no way to survive in New York City on eight dollars. One of the guide agency’s drivers had dropped me off in the City. Just the bridge toll was more than eight dollars.

I went into the bank and pulled the check out of my daypack as I waited in line. I handed the teller the check and my California driver’s license. “That’s not a local check.” She pushed the check back to me and looked over my shoulder to the the next customer. “But it is local,” I said. “It’s a paycheck and the business headquarters in Nyack. It’s right here on the check.” “Our bank only cashes local checks.”

Okay, I’ll just find another bank, I thought as I shoved the check back in my daypack. Deep inside, so I wouldn’t get pick-pocketed. I lugged my duffel bag filled with my summer’s worth of gear out the bank door to the sidewalk. I picked a direction and walked.

The sidewalks weren’t too crowded, but no one looked at me, no one smiled. That was okay, I guess. I didn’t feel much like smiling right then. I was hungry and still tired from cold nights huddled in my sleeping bag, shivering with a fever. I had ten days until my flight to California, I had to hang on until then.

There was another bank down the way and I trudged inside.

Inside it was the same story. The teller was slightly nicer though as she explained that no bank in New York City would cash a check from Nyack. Though it was less than 20 miles away, it wasn't "local."

I desperately blurted out my plight, showed her my expired ATM card and my checkbook and every form of identification I had. She was sorry, but the bank wouldn't allow her to cash the check.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the next teller over close her window, just as another customer was coming. I thought, "Oh well. That's how people are in New York City, right?" I slid out the door onto the sidewalk. And to my surprise the teller who had closed her window came up right behind me.

She said to me, "Look, I heard what's going on with you when you told the other teller and I'm sorry." I asked her if she could cash my check. She shook her head no and as I looked at the ground in disappointment, she said, "But I trust you. I'm going to get \$200 out of my own account and you can write a personal check to me."

I have never been so grateful in my whole life. Visions of huddling in a doorway and getting arrested made way for plans for a cheap lunch and a bus or train to Pennsylvania where I knew some people I thought might take me in for a week as I waited for my flight home. I thanked her profusely and she looked embarrassed. I wanted to hug her, but this was New York City.

As I made my way the three miles to Grand Central Station, the sidewalks were growing more crowded. I couldn't help smiling at people, but no one smiled back. That's just how New Yorkers are, right? I had just met the only friendly one back at the bank. The exception that proves the rule.

No one in all of Grand Central Station would even slow down enough for me to ask directions. I finally found a doorway that looked semi-official where I thought that someone might help me because that was their job.

Oh rats, this isn't the information booth, these are train workers. I was surprised to find that they were fonts of knowledge, clamoring and interrupting each other as they decided the best way

for me to get to my destination - I had to take the bus. The guys said that it was too far for me to walk with all my gear, so they GAVE me a trolley to walk the half a mile to the bus station. That's just the way New Yorkers are, right?

Prayer: "Dear God, please help me not to judge people by their reputations. And thank you for even the trials in life that can bring wonderful miracles and surprises."

Hospitality by Example

Vernie Kraft

On coming to Longmont to live with my brother, Bob, and his wife, Carol Matheis-Kraft, I have been shown over and over again examples of their warm hospitality. Their generous invitation to share their home was the beginning of my journey toward a greater understanding of the breadth hospitality can take. Despite the fact that she was caring full-time for my brother, Carol was always aware of friends and members of the church who were ill and in need of food. She took time to cook and minister to this need. On Halloween, Christmas, and other special occasions she baked cookies which she shared with our neighbors. When our vegetables were ready for harvesting, neighbors received a portion.

After Bob died, Carol's examples of concern for others multiplied. She became a volunteer and board member of the OUR Center. She was able to open our home in a way she'd been unable to do during Bob's illness. Being rather shy and reserved, I tended not to think of arranging the gatherings she proposed, such as a meal with our neighbors, a Super Bowl Party, and a Thanksgiving Dinner at the church.

The regular visits by many of our congregants to members of our church who are shut-ins, an important part of the Congregational Care Ministry, continues to be a passionate part of Carol's endeavors and its success is largely due to her organizational skills.

I've been greatly influenced by Carol's example. Although I'm still much more comfortable with one-on-one communication, I make an effort to speak up more in groups and become more aware of and act on the needs of those around me. Visitation to shut-ins is becoming a part of my life and Carol's emphasis on going outside one's comfort zone is an ongoing challenge for me.

Acts of Spontaneous Hospitality

Lynette Moyer

Scripture: Luke 10:30-35 - “The Samaritan went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring olive oil and wine on them. He hoisted him onto his own animal, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. The next day he took out two silver coins, which he gave to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Look after him, and on my way back I’ll reimburse you for any extra expense you have had.’”

Luke 14:16-24 - “Someone was giving a big dinner and invited many guests. . . . But one by one they all began to make excuses . . . Then the master of the house got angry and instructed his slave: ‘Quick! Go out into the streets and alleys of the town, and usher in the poor, and crippled, the blind, and the lame. . . . go into the roads and the country lanes . . . so my house will be filled.’”

It’s always good to remember how, in the Gospel stories, Jesus surprises his companions by modeling a spontaneous hospitality. He shares meals with suspiciously-regarded gentiles, scary lepers, and hated tax collectors. Also, he graciously accepts meals, lodging, and the oil offered by the woman who bathes his feet (against the protest of the disciples). Likewise, his teachings center on the value of this unconventional, even spontaneous, hospitality.

The Good Samaritan, in the excerpt above, immediately offers help to the wounded man in the ditch. He must have known that the victim didn’t associate with Samaritans, but he doesn’t stop to consider his “suitability” as rescuer. Instead he takes the injured man to an inn, tends to him, and pays the innkeeper. He even promises to return. Jesus is clear that other rich and important passers-by refused to offer even first aid, much less any act of continued hospitality.

The second parable talks about accepting hospitality. Hospitality, like gift-giving, is a two-way negotiation. It requires gracious acceptance. I was pleased once to be told by a cheerful, generous

hostess (whose many parties I'd never be able to reciprocate, yet kept attending!) that I was "a good guest." No doubt this was just one of the ways she made all feel welcome, but it stuck with me -- there was value in being a willing, lively, and accepting guest.

To this point, Jesus's parable about the host giving a big dinner party applies. The eager host, angered and hurt by his friends' excuses, invites strangers from "the streets and alleys of the town . . . the poor, and crippled, the blind, and the lame." He opens the doors wider and more inclusively than was the custom. The house Jesus describes is a big house filled with diverse "good guests." The host's generosity is unconditional and non-judgmental, and the guests have done their part by accepting the spontaneous meal.

I learned about spontaneous hospitality one day many years ago when I needed help and dreaded having to ask. My husband and I had to make an unexpected trip to a nearby city for a distressing medical reason, but we had three small children at home. We didn't know how long we'd be gone. I reluctantly phoned a friend, only to hear a pause and then a string of excuses. It was a lot to ask. I felt guilty.

Discouraged, I forced myself to call another neighbor. This second neighbor, in the blink of an eye, said, "Bring them right over." She didn't ask for any explanation, or set down any conditions, or fret over when we'd be home. She welcomed my children with a smile into her busy day as if it were nothing. "I'll feed them if you're not back by dinner." Later, I found out her own children were gone most of that day. She could have had a day to herself! Instead, she mothered mine, not even knowing precisely why we had asked and never demanding to know.

What I appreciated as much as the offer to host my children was this friend's doing so instantly, unstintingly, and without needing any explanation. It was spontaneous and whole-hearted, and I've always felt, Christ-like.

Amazing Grace

Michelle Aldecocea

When I think about my Grandmother, so many examples of her kindness and generosity spring to mind, I find it hard to pick out a single story that would exemplify what an amazing person she was. Her name was Graciela, the Spanish version of Grace. I'm sure I've heard more than one person refer to her as "Amazing Grace," with good reason.

My mother and I were talking one night about the many lives my grandmother affected by her strong faith and her belief in giving to others. She recalled the following story about her mother and the lasting impression it made on her as a child, and later, in her adult years, as she strove to continue the same spirit of kindness and hospitality in her own life.

One hot summer in late 1950's Miami, new neighbors moved in next door to the home of Grace and Harry Valdes, both of whom were second generation Americans of Cuban descent. Their children, Cynthia and Claude, quickly made friends with the new renters, a Puerto Rican family with plenty of kids of their own. Over time, Grace noticed the family didn't attend church on a regular basis, so she started considering different ways she could tell them about her own Christianity. Another observation she made was that this family was struggling to put food on the table; they were living in poverty.

Grace came up with an idea. She invited the neighbor's children over for a vacation bible school held in her house, with her own kids. As all of them were already good friends, the invitation was quickly accepted. When the neighbor kids arrived, she invited them to sit down with her family, pick up the extra bibles she had set out for them to use, and share in conversation about stories about Jesus. Such studies worked up an appetite in all, so she took the opportunity to serve a generous lunch and Kool-Aid for all. The children loved it, and started coming over for bible study on a regular basis with "Miss Grace." The two families grew closer, and Grace and

Harry would often take the neighbor children to church with their own family. By the time the Holidays came around, they celebrated together. The neighbor children brought little presents they'd saved up to buy, including a small topaz ring for Cynthia and a toy car for Claude.

The following year, tragedy befell the neighbor family; their dear Grandfather passed away and sadly they found him alone in his apartment. But, based on their newly growing faith, they felt reassured he went to be with Jesus and took comfort in that.

My grandmother always went out of her way to help everyone she met who had a need, spiritual or otherwise. Her prayers were always answered, in powerful ways. To this day, I seek out opportunities to be just like her as often as I can, as do many in my family who learned from her kind and giving ways. I hope she's watching all of us, and smiling.

Open and Affirming Hospitality

Marilyn Decker

Brian McNaught stood outside the sanctuary with me, waiting to speak on Sunday morning of the Lay-Clergy weekend on Open and Affirming. I placed my hand on his arm and discovered that he was trembling. I tried to reassure him by squeezing his arm, but I'm not sure how effective it was. I believe he was trying to summon his courage. He took a big breath and, at the proper moment, we walked down the aisle to the pulpit. I remember him looking out at the congregation for a few moments before he spoke. He told us in his talk about how the Catholic church had rejected him and how difficult it still was to speak in a church, even one like ours that was considering becoming Open and Affirming.

When we did adopt the policy of Open and Affirming toward Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered, it placed a new responsibility on the shoulders of current members of the congregation. How could we make those who had been rejected by other churches for all of their lives feel welcome in our church? Would they accept our sincere overtures of friendship?

For most of us, transitioning to becoming more inclusive came quite easily because the LGBT's, our new friends, were so receptive to invitations to participate in church activities. As the choir gained new members, the ushering program grew in size, the altar guild expanded, and other boards and committees filled out their memberships, it was a win-win for everyone.

However, none of us knew how profoundly we would be affected by our congregation's decision to become Open and Affirming. The opportunity to hear testimonies from the pulpit of how much it meant to assist in serving communion, the joy expressed of a new choir member who said "joining this choir was the best decision I ever made," the mind-expanding knowledge of learning about lifestyles different from our own, the heartfelt thank-you for baby gifts from new lesbian parents, the gleeful invitation to a commitment ceremony and reception, and hearing about lives changed for

the better are the things that I will always treasure.

I do know of a few who tried us out for awhile and then left in spite of all of our efforts. It's possible that their hurts had not healed enough yet or perhaps we were not practiced enough in our attempts to befriend. Or maybe the timing of where they were on their spiritual journey was just not right for inclusion in our church at that moment. I hope that they will try us again when they are ready. In the meantime, we shall practice being open to all those who have been discriminated against.

Prayer - God of Us All, We never know what our influence on others may be. Help us to always be ready to befriend and include those who need Your love shining through us.

Life Changing Hospitality

Linda Petitt

I sat in my parked car waiting to go in. I didn't want to be early so I would have to talk to anyone or answer any questions. I was feeling pretty skittish and it wouldn't take a lot to frighten me away, so I waited a little longer before I got out of the car. I wasn't sure what I would find inside and was probably a little nervous I would run into someone who might know me. A couple minutes before the meeting was scheduled to start, I headed in the direction of the yellow building.

As I went through the door, I noticed the green plaid wall paper through the cloud of smoke that filled the small room. I heard boisterous conversation and the sound of laughter. I recognized no one and was hurrying to find a chair when this little white-haired lady headed in my direction. There must have been some kind of aura around her for she seemed to glow and as she drew near, she held out her hand and said " Hello, my name is Doris and I am so glad that you are here!"

The warmth of her welcome erased any doubts I may have had that I was in the wrong place. I was exactly right where I needed to be. I was in a place where I wouldn't be judged or ridiculed. When people talked, they seemed to be able to put into words all the feelings jumbled up inside of me that I had no way to express. When I left, the other people told me to keep coming back.

Doris greeted me every week when I returned and the longer I knew her, the more she taught me. She sat in her sunroom and had coffee every morning with her best friend, God. She invited me to join them. She taught me to look for the miracles God put in every single day. She offered me reassurance and unconditional love and guided me through the process of learning how to live a different way than I had done previously. She cheered me on and praised me. She offered encouragement when the path was rocky and difficult. She always seemed to know just what I needed.

Doris taught me lessons for over twenty-five years. Last year she left to join that best friend of hers. But I remember the lessons she taught me and the gracious person she was. I will be eternally grateful for her. I am not sure what would have happened to me if she hadn't been there to welcome me that night so very long ago. But I do know that the journey could not have been any better!

Prayer: Ever-loving God, Thank you for Doris and her extravagant welcome. Help me be the same kind of example of your love to others as she was to me. Amen

Hospitality

Marleigh Jacques

In the late 1990's, in the face of the growing pandemic of AIDS, in the interest of becoming more informed, our small church invited a nurse, whose brother had AIDS, to speak during a Lenten Series. Her simple story had a powerful effect, and before long, we were exploring ways to help.

"Food," suggested Linda. "We can prepare food." (This is often a first offering of hospitality). Thus, a few of us began preparing food for the formal Tuesday evening dinners at the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. Then more of us made lunches and delivered them to consumers who actually lived among us. (Reaching out to neighbors we hadn't really seen before, another step in extending hospitality).

Now we had a good-sized group that had taken the necessary training and we began to explore other ways we might extend our hospitality.

Bill chose to drive the consumers to doctor's appointments in Boston (225 miles round trip because at that time our local hospital was not hospitable to those with AIDS). Anita manned the phones at the Center when the receptionist was absent. Margaret, well into her eighties and blind, climbed into the pulpit one Sunday and broke her silence about the death of her son from AIDS and enlisted our help in designing and sewing his Memorial Quilt.

I chose home care, volunteering to spell the caregiver when necessary. That's where I met Ed: wheel-chair bound, son of a Gideon Bible salesman in Mississippi, retired ESL teacher, and fellow traveler! We became great friends, eating at one another's homes, sharing travel stories, making doctor's visits, speaking Portuguese with our granddaughter and enjoying enchiladas at his favorite Mexican restaurant. When he died, I knew without a doubt where hospitality leads. It leads to love.

Scripture: Matthew 25:34-40

Hospitality from the Inside Out

Mimi Farrelly

“It’s difficult to create free space for a stranger when there is no solitude in our lives...Solitude is the climate of hospitality.” (Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p. 73)

One of my first summer jobs as a college student took place at the United Nations Hospitality Center in New York City. I remember an airy office, relatively high above ground, and a desk, mine to share, with boxes and boxes of colored index cards, each one describing the name and contact information for either the family of a UN foreign employee or a local family that wanted to provide a meal or an outing for foreign visitors.

Mine was the task of matchmaker, creating social opportunities for persons who looked quite different on the outside (skin color, hair style, wardrobe, etc.) and whose English was often quite limited.

Besides connecting family A with family B, I was instructed to do follow-up phone calls with both parties to assess how the meeting had gone and encourage future contact. Perhaps the biggest gift of that summer was a deeper understanding of how strangers (myself included!) do and don’t connect.

Over time I began to suspect that the reasons why some arranged outings worked well and others fell short of the mark, often repeatedly so, had less to do with food preferences, child rearing practices or the conversational pecking order. But I was only 18, and fairly naïve.

Hospitality, previously explained to me as friendliness and the willingness to help foreigners feel at home, had sounded so appealing, so sensible, so familiarly Christian. Like the Golden Rule, it had been a main tenet of my childhood and my church.

Why had no one at this job bothered to explain that hospitality was a subtle practice, even a spiritual practice, a blend of art and science requiring soul searching and hard work?

Looking back now, 40 + years later, I imagine equipping another eager intern with a little more education about the hospitality job she so eagerly accepted. Here are some of the skills I would be sure to teach, skills which I am still learning.

Meditation. How to regularly get quiet and empty our minds so there's room for new information, even a new person.

Mindfulness training. Identifying our own inner chatter, biases, and scripting before broadcasting welcome to any and all.

Extending friendliness, acceptance, and curiosity towards oneself as well as the stranger.

Recognizing our own ambivalence about foreigners: the impulse to reach out versus the instinct to recoil because someone is smelly, or pushy, or needy.....in other words, different.

Making peace with our own natures, especially our own extroversion or introversion.

Not promising more than we can deliver.

Being honest about our intentions. Is our impulse towards hospitality driven by loneliness and a need to be liked, or by a genuine desire to be of service?

Deep listening. Learning to hear the message between the lines.

Admitting where self-centeredness, judgment, and fear can be barriers to hospitality.

Above all, remaining hospitable to Spirit. Remembering that God is the ultimate Guest

Ironing Day Hospitality

Marilyn Decker

My mother always had the philosophy of having a home that was open to others. I remember often coming home from school to see one of my mom's neighborhood lady friends there, talking, while my mom did her ironing. The outlet that she used for her iron was right next to the front door in the living room of our little house. That way, she could watch for us coming home, hear the telephone ring, get a cooling breeze from the screen door, and answer the door if someone came to visit.

In those days, she hung the wash to dry on the circular clothesline out in the backyard and then ironed a lot of our clothes. She kept a glass sprinkling bottle (previously a soft drink bottle) with a plastic sprinkler top full of tiny holes, a big plastic bag and metal hangers in her lined clothes basket for her weekly ironing. There was no such thing as a steam iron in those days. If she didn't get to all of the ironing on the day that she dampened the clothing with the sprinkler, she would put the remaining clothes in a zippered plastic bag in the refrigerator so that the clothes wouldn't get mildewed before she had time to get back to the ironing. She ironed my dad's white shirts to wear to IBM, her housedresses, my dresses to wear to school, and my brother's plaid shirts. I can't remember if she ironed the sheets for the beds (probably), but I know she ironed the pillowcases and handkerchiefs because those two are the ones I learned to iron on.

One neighbor in particular visited quite often. She lived 4 or 5 houses down the hill from us and definitely seemed to need a kind friend. Lena had a lot of sadness in her face, I remember, and cried easily. She had two boys, one my older brother's age and one 3 or 4 years older. When I was an adult, I found out that Lena's husband put her on a bus, all alone, to go to NYC for illegal abortions whenever she became pregnant after he decided he didn't want any more children. If my mom had not welcomed Lena into her home, she probably would have had no one with whom to share

her heartaches. She and her husband were from Czechoslovakia and they mostly kept to themselves. It didn't seem to matter that my mother kept on working while Lena talked. I know now that sometimes it's easier to talk about intense subjects while you're halfway occupied, like while walking, working on a puzzle, preparing foods, or riding in a car.

I remember how Lena would lean down toward me, greet me by name with her soft voice, and her eyes would crinkle up until they were almost slits when she gave me a sweet smile. I wonder now if she had wanted a little girl in addition to her boys.

Prayer - Comforter God, may we learn to have open homes and open hearts to minister to those who come into our lives. Amen.

A Lesson in Hospitality at the Dinner Table

Marian Parsons

“We long to have companions who travel by our side, strong friends to call and answer with whom we are allied; As we lift up each other when struggles lay us low, community develops; our faith and caring grow.”

Our congregation sang these words in the hymn “We Yearn, O Christ, for Wholeness” in worship on February 5. At the bottom of the hymnal page, a note informed us that the inspiration for the words of this hymn came from a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Harold Wilke during the International Year of Persons with Disabilities, in 1983.

A flood of memory came to me as I read that note. Almost immediately, I was the young child sitting at my family’s dinner table, trying to contain my curiosity and not stare when our dinner guest propped his sock-clad foot on the table and grasped his fork between his toes. With easy motions, he ate from his fork and spoon and drank coffee from a cup, holding the utensils and cup handle between his big toe and the other toes. He was able to do this because he wore a special sock with a separate space for his big toe, and because his hip was so flexible that he could easily lift his foot to his mouth.

My sister and I had been prepared by our mother, who hoped we would not embarrass her as we hosted our guest who had been born without arms. We knew that, when he was a young boy, his parents had decided he could learn to do anything that children born with arms could do. He played baseball by standing on one leg and using his other leg to hold and swing the bat. He developed the amazing flexibility that my sister and I could see that day at our dinner table.

Our dinner guest, that day and on other occasions, was Harold Wilke. He and his wife were friends of my parents when the two young clergy families lived in eastern Pennsylvania in the 1940’s. Back then, he (like my father) was a minister in the Evan-

gical and Reformed Church, which later merged with the Congregational Christian Churches to form what we now know as the United Church of Christ.

Over the years, as a UCC minister, Dr. Wilke became a strong voice for persons with disabilities. After many years of hard and often frustrating work, he stood behind President George H.W. Bush in 1990 as the President signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law.

The hospitality of a family enjoying the company of a person able to eat without using arms . . . The hospitality of a national church recognizing the professional capabilities of this differently-abled person . . . The hospitality of a nation learning that we all have something special to offer, no matter what our abilities are. But there is still more work to be done, if we are truly to practice hospitality. The last words of that hymn on Feb. 5 are a prayer for today:

“No longer are we fearful, your love pervades each place.
Empower us with courage to claim your healing grace.”

Hospitality in a Time of Grief

Marcia Silkensen

I made the trip home to Illinois in early December for my friend Angie's funeral. My parents moved away in October so I stayed at two different homes. Jane and I have been best friends since about second grade. Donna and I were born 3 days apart. Angie, Jane, Donna and I grew up together living at the swimming pool each summer, playing every sport offered in high school, and having the same teachers our parents did in high school. Their homes are as familiar to me as my own would have been.

Angie fought hard against the brain cancer for 18 months before losing this battle. She left two daughters, a husband, parents, sisters, and many friends from the Class of '78 of Pana High School and the town, SIU, and Bloomington, including her Bible study group at the Lutheran church where her service was held.

At the service we were reminded that "your strength comes from God" many times by the pastor. Angie's teenage daughter wrote that there is a "hole right through my heart" that would be there until she got to be with her mom again in heaven.

I will never forget this trip home to my town of 6000 and the hospitality I was shown from my friend, Jane, and her mom, Betty, my cousin Donna, Aunt Annette and Uncle Don. The meals, stories we shared, and the walks around town all were healing.

Hearts were "sick within each of us" and grief seems beyond healing, especially to those closest to a family member that has died. I am so thankful for this time we spent together.

Scripture: Jeremiah :18 - "My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sick within me."

Hospital-ity

Patti Taylor

Mr. Bill bustles into the waiting room at the University Hospital cancer radiation center every morning at 7:00 am. On the way to his desk, he drops three handknit hats in a basket labeled “Free Hats.” He jovially greets the three of us already sitting skimming magazines—greet us each by name—and sets his stuff down at the large reception desk. He’s in his fifties, impeccably groomed, wearing a crisply ironed shirt and tie and a big smile.

During my first visit to the radiation center, he introduced himself as “the host.” Not the receptionist, the HOST. He has a Saturday Night Live “Mr. Bill” rubber figure on the counter. I bet his co-workers find him a little eccentric.

I have entered this waiting room at least 30 times. Unfailingly, Mr. Bill greets everyone with the same cordiality, even when the patients are a little grumpy. One day I heard him talk on the phone for 15 minutes making sure that a patient had a ride home after treatment.

He scurries around getting coffee, straightening magazines, and delivering the remote buzzers that tell us when it’s our turn for treatment. He reminds us kindly if we’re scheduled to see the doctor after radiation.

This is a huge hospital, with hundreds of patients seen each day. I know he’s paid to do this job, but it is not just a job for him. While I’m waiting for my turn, I know that someone cares about me as an individual--not just another patient. When he greets me, I see the face of God.

This morning I was in a lot of pain, struggling to get into my coat after treatment. Mr. Bill left his desk to come over to help me. I confided to him that everything hurt. He looked at me, smiled, and said, “I’ll say some extra prayers for you.”

Cancer treatment has sometimes made me feel alienated, demoralized, lonely; the other 60 or so people Mr. Bill greets every day probably feel that way, too. I’m sure he is evidence that God hasn’t forgotten about us.

From the Roadside, Looking Up

Paul Hansen

The story of the Good Samaritan is often held up as an example of hospitality and most sermons that reference this Scripture continue that mode. Indeed as I understand it, Jesus was trying to teach his listeners a new way of being in the world that surpassed the traditional ways of treating other people, including one's enemies or foreigners. And that is well and good. But what if we look at this story, undoubtedly a made-up teaching story, from the perspective of the man on the road, from the roadside, looking up? Certainly it would have been discouraging to see those first two pass by, but would he have given up and stopped asking for help? There are two sides to this human transaction.

In the past few years, as I have aged and have less strength, I find that I'm challenged to do something very difficult: to ask for help. That's an even greater challenge than trying to help others. I grew up on a farm in Kansas. My grandparents immigrated from Denmark in the 1800's and homesteaded in western Iowa. Thus the pioneer ethic was strong in my family. Do-it-yourself was not a luxury, but a way of life on our farm. And yet, when one of our neighbors had been badly injured in an accident and was not able to operate his farm, all the neighbors arrived at spring planting time with their tractors and machinery and in only one day, the fields were prepared and the crops planted. I learned that that's what "good neighbors" did. I'm not sure that the man who was laid up really asked for that. We just did it, provided all our own gas for the project, and had a good time as well.

Now at this time in my life, I find it difficult, but increasingly necessary to ask for help, simple things like calling out to a stranger to help me lift the 40 lb. bag of dog food from the grocery cart to my car. And always, that stranger responds with a smile and says, "Sure, glad to help." My heartfelt thanks seem to be the only reward needed. I am having to abandon my well learned tendency to be independent and not ask for help. I, probably like you, when I've fallen or been hurt and someone asks, have many times said I was okay, when I really wasn't. The difficult spiritual lesson I am learning these days is to say, "Will you help me?"

Two Parts to Hospitality

Phyllis Rostykus

It seems oddly appropriate that I write a contemplation of hospitality while I am sitting in a dining room in Tennessee as a guest. When I first thought about the theme for the booklet, it was more about extending hospitality, the dozens of times John and I have taken people in who needed time, a space, shelter, or just a gathering with other folks.

There are, however, two parts to hospitality, both the giving and the receiving, and sometimes entertaining the thought that one might be the angel invited can be daunting.

I am a guest here, a stranger in a land that is very strange to me, but which makes sense to the natives who live here. It is an act of faith to follow the guidance of my local guide, and to be curious and open about what is appropriate here and what is to be appreciated. I loved walking into a liquor store with my hostess, and finding apple pie moonshine in canning jars with the resealable tops, golden and sloshing. The pride of the man behind the counter at my finding and prizing a local delicacy added to both his day and mine.

Or going into the local grocery store and finding a dozen different cures of ham in the meat section and asking for guidance on what to choose for our dinner. Getting giggled at for searching frantically for White Lily Flour, which is just flour down here, rather than the rare and low protein summer wheat flour that I cannot get back in Colorado. Being driven through the maze of dirt roads through golden grass and winter dark hills fringed with bare oak trees to visit folks in a cabin and fire a handgun in a makeshift firing range in the back.

It's fun finding that my hostess gets to see her world in a new light because of my ignorance and my delight at what's different. Things she considered commonplace or prosaic, become wonderful and unexpected through her hospitality.

Comfort Food

Randy Porter

I grew up in Northern Wisconsin. As with many places, we had our traditions and rituals. I suppose many of the influences came from our European relatives. We were non-dairy farmers. We grew our own fruit and vegetables. We would go to the neighbors for fresh non-pasteurized milk. We worked hard, but played hard fishing and boating. In winter we would ice fish or snowmobile.

My Dad bought the family farm from his parents. Grandma and Grandpa lived in town three miles away. We had cousins the other direction. The other relatives lived in the surrounding counties. Every holiday, birthday, or special occasion, we all, and I do mean “all” gathered for family bonding and meals. The kids always sat at their own table. If the gathering was on Sunday, it was after church. We were UCC Congregationalists. Some were Lutherans and a few were Catholic. Most of the time, everyone came to our farm because we had plenty of room. The kids could go outside exploring, play in the tree house, look at the barn animals, climb the grain bins or play hide and seek.

Sometimes we would go to some other relatives’ house. If we went to Aunt Rachel’s house, it was kind of boring. We always had brown bread, roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, jello salad and a fruit pie. She had her kind of hospitality; we had ours.

I guess my point of all this is that all the relatives had their own ways of hospitality. It was the predictability of that hospitality that made it so beautiful. To further my point, that is what my current church home is to me. The genuine hospitality that flows from First Congregational United Church of Christ in Longmont, Colorado elevates me. It has all the fixings of Aunt Rachel’s meal. It’s predictable and delicious. It is spiritual comfort food

All of this has happened because I have accepted God’s hospitality in my life. I give thanks to my partner, my family, to my church home and to God for a life of that comfort food called hospitality.

My Mother's Hospitality Then and Now

Rebecca Meier

My mother is always happy for a phone call or visit regardless of whether she's in bed, in her pajamas, or hasn't dusted recently. But it was not always so. She used to be more like the rest of us--more concerned about the impression she might make or an urgent task she had to take care of--than simply happy to speak with or see another person. At least this is my impression of the "rest of us" and certainly, it describes me more often than I'd like!

Over the past year, my mother, now 84, has entered a new state of mind in which dates and days are uncertain and even some things in the past and plans for the future appear to be unclear to her. Phone calls and notes I leave stating where I've gone and when I'll be back seem to be anchors for her or much-needed frames to clarify the present moment. She recently said that seeing Horsetooth Rock helps her figure out where she is when she's out and about driving in formerly familiar places around Fort Collins, where she's lived for about 20 years.

Although her new state of mind has its positive side, I miss her dinner parties with polished silver, china, and crystal from my great grandparents, the fully prepared guest room, and well-stocked pantry. She still apologizes for not having milk for my tea and coffee when I visit; yet she hasn't gotten any milk for me in many months now.

But she doesn't fret! And what a strange blessing that is. How Providential, it seems. My brother, sisters, and I do not know what lies ahead any more than my mother does, save for the inevitable.

My sister-in-law, Helen, and I, between us, are making sure she eats more than she feels like, takes her blood-pressure, thyroid, and memory medicines on schedule most of the time, and does a little more socially than she feels like. Other sisters help from a distance with phone calls and advice and visits when possible. My mother tells me frequently she appreciates our efforts. Even Rose-

marie, the youngest grandchild, helps by sitting with Grandma at her computer and giving tips on completing the brain training exercises in Lumosity. And Nicholas has helped her with Facebook, which seems to be his favorite Web site.

I think that my mother's current and singular focus on the present more than makes up for her lack of the traditional trappings of hospitality. Nice lighting, pretty napkins, table cloths, dishes, flowers, and yummy food and drink are nice, of course. But is their function actually to entice us into truly being in the present moment?

I know that my mother's now seeming to be almost locked into the present moment actually makes spending time with her very pleasant. She is always happy to hear from me and see me in a stronger way than she was before.

I wish I could remember clearly now the last dinner party she gave with all the customary finery. In recent years, to compensate for her reduced energy, she would plan every detail of a dinner the week before the party and usually have the dinner table completely set the day before. I even remember talking her out of putting a pat of butter on each place's butter dish the night before due to my concern about what might land on and stick to the butter over night. She accommodated me but now that I think of it, that may have been the last time she used the individual butter dishes.

Now I plan the meals and make them and she brings her delight in having company and helps with tasks when she's rested.

Running to Welcome

Rick King

I remember the excitement my brother and sister and I experienced when my parents, who loved to entertain guests, would ask us to help them with greeting, hanging up coats, bringing people something to drink or appetizers, and helping at the table with serving, refilling water glasses, clearing and bringing dessert. Often we would run out to their cars in the driveway and help them out.

We felt special, that we were doing something very important. And the adults always loved it!

Abraham does the same thing in the story from Genesis 18, of when three strangers, weary from their desert journey, arrive at his and Sarah's tent. Abraham is anything but grudging in his welcome: he runs to greet them, bows to the ground in joy, and then runs into the tent to tell Sarah to get bread started, runs to the herd and selects a calf to slaughter, and prepares it.

The strangers stay the night, no doubt, and the next morning are gone, maybe to be seen again, maybe not. But because the Abe-and-Sarah household takes hospitality seriously, life can go on as it has been because the social custom of hospitality was offered, they were fed, and know they're not alone without a place to stay when on the road.

But it's Abraham's enthusiasm that makes this truly radical hospitality: Abraham looks at the opportunity to welcome and care for these men as a privilege rather than an obligation, an honor rather than a duty.

I often think the enthusiasm of our younger members can show us the way, if we notice and find a way to do as they do.

Running to welcome strangers sends a message of extravagant welcome and radical hospitality!

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-8

1The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He 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. 3He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let 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.” 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8Then 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.

Giving and Receiving

Ruth Howe

Hospitality can be equated with the life blessings of giving and receiving. A dear friend of mine gave me a book many years ago, and it has become an important part of my life. I've given it to others, including my two daughters, hoping it will become a part of their lives as well. The book is "Simple Abundance*." It suggests 6 principles that, when woven together produce a tapestry of contentment, inner peace, and happiness.

These include gratitude, simplicity, order, harmony, beauty, and joy. Binding these is a deep faith in our God who makes it all possible.

"Be still and wait expectantly, knowing that in the warp and woof of your daily life are the golden threads of a simply abundant tomorrow"*

*Sarah Ban Breathnach

Poem

Rebecca Naffziger Meier

My Soul Is...at Home at La Foret

My soul is slow
like a green tree
in a breezy meadow
with the wind rushing by
and sometimes water
in heavy rains
or people in SUVs
or running shoes.
But I move slowly
up when I can.
There is enough to feel
right here.

[Poem inspired by “My soul is...” writing exercise at the poetry table
at La Foret Grandparent and Me Camp 2011 with Pastor Sara.]

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