

## ***Risky Business***

A Sermon Preached by the  
Reverend Gale W. Robb  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Romans 6:15-18  
Matthew 10:40-42

Last week we joined Father Abraham as he was dozing under the oaks at Mamre and was awakened by a visit from God that came with life-changing promises. You remember that, in a remarkable display of hospitality, he quickly called for water for the visitors to drink and wash with, for bread to be baked, and a meal prepared for them. Given the distance that people traveled and the hardships encountered along the way, hospitality was ingrained in the culture, part of the DNA of the community. The common practice when a traveler came into a town, was for the whole town to gather at the well, and it was incumbent upon the residents to provide food and lodging for the visitors.

The same was true for early Christian communities. It is in Paul's letter to the Hebrews that people were reminded to show hospitality because they might indeed be entertaining angels. And in Acts, we read that the early deacons practiced hospitality throughout the community, caring for those in need, just as our deacons do.

Rarely were the travelers part of one's family. After all, you were probably living with your entire family. They weren't packing up the camels for a cross-country summer vacation. No, the travelers were different; they were aliens, often foreigners, people who ate different food, wore different clothes, had different customs, spoke different languages, worshipped different gods. Opening one's home was risky business. But it was what they believed God expected of them, because that kind of welcoming hospitality was part of the character of their God, and hospitality was a measure of the Hebrew community's faithfulness to God.

We would consider that kind of hospitality incredibly foolish, possibly even dangerous. None of us would open our door to a stranger, much less invite them for dinner and offer the spare bedroom for the night. One writer reminds us that, "Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems, is the human fear of the stranger."

In thinking about how faith communities offer hospitality, how we welcome people, I went back to some reading about the Rule of St. Benedict. You couldn't have a better starting place for hospitality, perhaps because no one does hospitality better than the Benedictines, who for fifteen centuries have demonstrated what it means to welcome Christ and entertain angels.

David Robinson is a Presbyterian pastor who has written about living the Rule of St. Benedict, and says this: "One of the most revolutionary sentences in all Western civilization since the canonization of the Scriptures may be found in 'The Rule of St. Benedict,' It is this: *All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*" Robinson claims that this particular part of the rule, "has revolutionized my approach to 'visitors' – on Sunday mornings at worship, at my front door, in our village. How many opportunities am I missing every day to spend time with Christ in the life of a stranger?" He goes on, "Since I encountered the Benedictine spirituality of Christ-centered hospitality, I've adopted a more open-hearted, adventurous approach to guests and visitors,

especially *poor people* and *pilgrims*, two classes of people who Benedict especially welcomed. Benedict lived in a time of overwhelming societal distress and upheaval, yet he called his monks to take the risk and welcome the stranger as Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

While the Benedictines live their faith through hospitality, sometimes we find inspiration for hospitality from more unlikely sources. Several years ago, author Bruce Feiler, whose name might be familiar from his book, *Walking the Bible*, wrote an article for *Gourmet Magazine* entitled, “The Therapist at the Table,” about lessons learned working at what he calls “America’s most service-oriented restaurant,” Union Square Café in New York City. The article opens with this sentence, “In my first minute on the job, Table 31 caught on fire.” Right there you know you want to read more, don’t you?

Feiler goes on to write about how the owner of the Union Square Café developed five core values that embody his vision of what he calls “enlightened hospitality.” 1) caring for each other, 2) caring for our guests, 3) caring for our community, 4) caring for our suppliers, 5) caring for our investors. They may seem obvious, but think about how many service-oriented businesses fail dismally when it comes to extending this kind of hospitality. Feiler says, “every gesture, every act . . . is designed to fulfill these corny-sounding tenets, which make working there akin to joining a cult or the world’s jolliest company softball team. They also make the job intensely and unexpectedly personal.” He likens it to going to work inside your mother’s fantasy of how the world should be. “You stand up straight, smile, and say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ a lot. You do this when you’re tired, when you’re annoyed, when your feet hurt so much you could cry, and when you can’t believe (what the woman at Table 47 is wearing).”<sup>2</sup>

Feiler’s point is that at the end of the day, what you learn about yourself is that even the simplest gesture, a kind word, offering the cup of cold water, does as much for you as it does for the one you’re serving – perhaps more. Offering the welcome and the gift of compassion is as good for our spiritual health as it is for the well-being of the one being welcomed.

Churches believe that they know all about hospitality. Really, we do! We’ve taken the Gospel to heart, we understand the importance of opening the doors and welcoming the stranger, of offering the cup of cold water, of seeing Christ in everyone we meet. We make sure there are greeters at the door, that we wear our name-tags, that we speak to visitors, and invite them to join us for coffee. We put ads in the local paper at Christmas and Easter so that the community knows when we’re having worship services.

We work hard to make sure the building is accessible, warm, and welcoming; that our nursery and childcare facilities are state-of-the-art, that our Christian Education program offers something for all ages, our Sunday School rooms are well-staffed and clean, and our programs current. Even though we don’t act on it, we know that more than half of all new people who walk in the door say they visited for the first time because someone they knew invited them. Most of us would like someone else to do the inviting, because we really aren’t very comfortable talking about our faith.

Like the employees at the Union Square Café, we do everything we know how to do to make our church open, inviting, and welcoming. One of the problems is that most of us are at least a decade behind in our thinking.

This past week the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) met in San Jose, California, and one of the first orders of business was to elect the moderator, the person

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<sup>1</sup> David Robinson, “Monastic Gifts, Cloister Flowers: Benedictine Spirituality for Presbyterians,” *Hungryhearts*, Fall 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Feiler, “The Therapist at the Table,” *Gourmet*, October 2002.

who will be the face of the denomination for the next two years. I can't tell you how excited Dries and I were to learn that the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow had been elected moderator. Reyes-Chow is the 39-year old pastor of Mission Bay Community Church in San Francisco, which began as a storefront church and last year won the Sam and Helen Walton Award for outstanding new church development. He is the grandson of Chinese and Filipino immigrants to California, and his mother is a pastor.

Here's what the General Assembly news agency reported about the election: "In his address to the Assembly, (Reyes-Chow) noted that he makes as many pastoral calls by email as by in-person visitation.

"Such is the future of ministry, Reyes-Chow said. Mission Bay has a state-of-the-art website and extensive electronic communications among members and participants, which he said is absolutely essential for a congregation that is predominantly under-40."

In the press conference following his election, Rev. Reyes-Chow said that blogging and using Facebook and other social-networking sites "is part of my way of being, how we naturally engage with people." He believes that being transparent and prolific will "help people feel invited to participate in the church in a new way."<sup>3</sup> In other words, how we offer the cup of cold water needs to happen in ways that we are just now beginning to realize and act on, and that the rest of the world is already doing.

One of the things we heard over and over and over again through the survey and through conversations around the tables at the congregational meeting last Sunday was the very heartfelt desire to attract the next generation of worshippers, the under-40s, the younger families. In what was one of the most exciting developments that has happened since I've been here, at their meeting last week the session approved the joint proposal from the Adult Education Committee and the Building and Operations Committee to begin remodeling the first-floor education wing, down the hall where the Chapel, the Fireside Room, and the Library currently live, into space that will be more welcoming to people whose lives no longer fit the model of church that most of us grew up with – the under-40s, the younger families.

You will hear more about it as the project gets underway, but watch for the first stage of the transformation this fall. What I can tell you is that it will take time and it will take money, but it is an investment in a future that is already upon us.

Here's another thing about that under-40 generation. Their time is far more limited than mine was at that age. And all of us who have children in that age range are acutely aware of that. What that means is that they aren't able or willing to commit the kind of time it takes to "do church" the way we all did it. But they are willing to get engaged with a short-term mission project or an ongoing ministry that allows some flexibility in their participation, and that is doing some good and making a difference that they can see and be part of.

Another problem is that most churches aren't willing to take the big risks. We do really well, for example, with mission work that requires a couple of hours a week of our volunteer time, and accepts checks. We give generously through the church to worldwide mission, to the places that we can't be, and we organize mission trips to the places that we can be. All of it is good work; I'm not implying that it isn't. And none of it is without some risk, of course, but we tend to stand back when it seems that we might be asked to participate in the radical hospitality that was the hallmark of Jesus' ministry.

There was a wonderful article, a month or so ago, in *The New Yorker* magazine, about an Episcopal church on the lower west side of Manhattan, that decided twenty-five years ago to

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<sup>3</sup> General Assembly News, June 21, 2008, San Jose, California

start a soup kitchen. It was a dying congregation in an historic building that needed major repair and restoration. But they had a pastor who had a vision, and decided, what the heck, if the diocese was going to close them up, they might as well do what good they could while they were still alive. So they came up with \$50,000, and on the first day they were open, they welcomed thirty-five guests.

Today the soup kitchen serves 1200 people a day. You heard me right, 1200 people every day, five days a week, it takes about 40 volunteers each day, and it costs \$10,000 every day. When the program outgrew the mission house, they decided to move it to the church, so they took out all the pews and made quite a bit of money selling them, because they didn't need them anymore. Now they set up tables and folding chairs every day in the sanctuary, where their guests are invited to sit down to a good meal. They don't limit the number of times a person can go through the line, because they realize that they are providing the only meal that many of these people will have that day.

The writer of this essay in *The New Yorker*, Ian Frazier, says that, "talking about hunger and being hungry are two different things; talk can wait for a convenient moment, but when you're hungry, you're hungry right now."

When asked to reflect on why they continued to do it, one of the staff members said, "Well, we do this because Jesus said to feed the hungry. There's no more to it than that . . . We believe that our job as Christians is to meet Jesus in the world. We meet him, unnamed and unrecognized, in the guests who come to the soup kitchen every day."<sup>4</sup>

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we turn Gideon Pond Hall into a soup kitchen. That particular vision of hospitality belongs to that particular church. I am suggesting that sometimes you have to take the really BIG risks in order to welcome God and entertain angels. You have to start asking the "What if" questions.

We're not going to open a soup kitchen for 1200 people, but what if we could make breakfast for fifty children, five days a week during the summer, when they're not likely to have more than one meal a day because they usually get breakfast and lunch at school, and school's out? What's the worst that could happen? Well, we might have to clean the carpet more often, but think of the joy that would fill that beautiful kitchen!

Or what if we could expand Homework Connection to reach still more children who struggle with the basics of elementary education? What if we could put together some kind of regular weekly program for elderly adults who live alone and need simple companionship and care and a good meal?

What if we offered weekly Bible study on a week-day, in the middle of the day, for those people who can't give up another evening, but could make it over here on their lunch hour? And what if we opened it to anybody in the community, including the fellow across the street who stops in once in a while for some financial help and is now asking questions about how to read the Bible?

We're still on this corner for a reason. We have the resources and the space, the energy, the love and, hopefully, the desire to change the way we welcome the stranger, to make a difference in this community, to be transformed. Someone has said that the problem with others is that they are just so . . . other. Others might not like us, or be like us. Others might refuse our kindness or take advantage of us. Others might expect more of us than we were prepared to give. Perhaps scariest of all, others might change us.

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Frazier, "Hungry Minds: Tales from a Chelsea Soup Kitchen," *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2008.

And, of course, that's the point. That's what God does, that's what God expects – that we will be changed; and getting involved with this kind of God is always risky business.

In his remarks to the General Assembly, the new moderator, Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow concluded by saying, “nothing is too hard or too wondrous for God. If the church steps out in faith rather than clinging to survival, to be more intent on being faithful than on being right, to be together based on our common covenant in Jesus Christ. . . then we will be able to live into a future in which we are a vital and vibrant presence in the world.” May it be so. Amen.