

HOSPITALITY REVISITED

About the first of September 1961, I moved to Ithaca and leased a furnished apartment in a private home. My landlady, Barbara Ross, happened to be the Chapel's organist, and she invited me to attend. I did, and here we are almost 56 years later! One simple invitation certainly had an impact on the course of my life.

Over those years, 21 (now 22) different pastors have been assigned to lead the Chapel. They have ranged in experience from seminarians to retirees. The appointments have varied from quarter- to full-time. Four pastors served six years each; thus, the remaining 32 of the past 56 years were served by 17 different persons, for an average of less than two years per appointment.

This was probably not ideal, particularly given the comings and goings of the community we serve. But we have been blessed by many outstanding pastors, and this little church has persisted through thick and thin. A few of you have suggested that I reflect on this history, but I will do so only indirectly through a focus on one word: **hospitality**. It encompasses much of what the Chapel has aspired to be over the years.

This sermon's theme is that hospitality can take many forms and have unknown consequences. My landlady certainly couldn't have known the consequences of her invitation for me. Acts of hospitality range from planned missions to individual, random acts of kindness. If you remember anything from this service, I hope that it will at least be the word "hospitality." If someone asks you next week, what was the service about? Hopefully something—the scripture, the hymns, and/or the sermon—will stimulate thinking about what it means to be hospitable. I plan to talk about hospitality from the viewpoint of the Chapel family—the group environment

we create—and of us as individuals. Hospitality is an attribute that requires constant attention, hence “hospitality revisited.”

The Chapel has a long history of commitment to missions, local and in the wider world. This is a consequence of the leadership of both pastors and laity. I will not dwell on formal, organized missions today, though the Chapel currently has a well-planned mission program. Before moving on, however, I want to mention the Rev. Roy Smyres. Our records show that he was the pastor here on three occasions, first in 1922-23 when he was a graduate student at Cornell and the last time for two years (July 1968-June 1970) in retirement, when I knew him.

Roy was committed to the well-being of humanity and spent much of his life abroad in mission work. His depth of feeling and commitment to missions is captured, in part, by a sentence from a book he wrote in the 1980s: “Let us never forget our personal relationship to God ... or our personal relationship to our fellow men.” He very much felt that Christians must minister to all of our fellow humans. I am confident that if the Rev. Smyres were alive today, he would want us to assist the refugees and displaced persons in the world whatever their ethnic or religious backgrounds. He spoke and wrote with passion about the people that he served on the African continent. He opposed the Vietnam War before it was fashionable to do so. His example challenges us to have a similar commitment to the less fortunate in the world.

Here at the Chapel, we state that **all** are welcome and that “all means all.” It is important that we remain conscious of creating an environment of a welcoming community consistent with “all means all.” What does a stranger experience upon entering the Chapel? That experience is important.

I illustrate this importance with two of my experiences in other churches. The first was at an UMC in Palo Alto CA almost 50 years ago, when I was on sabbatical leave at Stanford. I chose the church because it was within walking distance of my apartment. It turned out to have a rather formal atmosphere. There were greeters and ushers and visitor cards to fill out. But, few in the congregation spoke to me, and if they did, it was superficial. Opportunities to participate in church activities were not apparent, and no one invited me to participate. I persisted in attending, probably because the Sunday services were meaningful. What I remember all these years later is, however, that in nine months of attending, I did not learn the name of a single lay person. Moreover, the visitor card that I completed did not result in a contact until about eight months after I first filled one out (from as associate pastor).

My second experience occurred about 10 years later when I was on a sabbatical in Washington DC. I chose to attend Christ UMC in Southwest Washington. This church was the result of a merger of two churches that had occurred in the early 1960s when this area was being redeveloped; it had been a slum. The church was racially integrated, but what impressed me most was the warmth with which I was greeted. Individuals seemed glad to see me and invited me to participate in church activities. Consequently, I joined the choir which rehearsed on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings. I still have a list of the names of 25 choir members (about equally divided over the four choir parts) and also a list of the titles of music that we performed in the nine months that I participated.

While the Sunday services no doubt had meaning to me, what I remember most nearly 40 years later is the personal interactions and the acceptance of me although I was not a “star” tenor. Certainly many of the choir were superb musicians. There was the talented young black woman

with a three octave range, and a countertenor who could sing alto. Nonetheless I felt like I fit in. These were not lasting friendships, but their welcome was genuine.

Is there a message for us at Forest Home in these memories? Many of us in the congregation are associated with Cornell and Ithaca College, and others of us are professionals with advanced degrees. In this context, it is important that our environment is hospitable to those who come from other backgrounds. As a boy raised on a farm in rural Nebraska that did not have electricity and who finds it difficult to explain to my Nebraska friends and relatives what I did as a Cornell faculty member, I can imagine that some of them might not be comfortable in the Chapel's congregation, though I hope they would be.

Also, while it is unrealistic for us to have as many programs as larger churches, we do have a choir, book discussions, bible study, and occasional mission-related events as well as fellowship time. We should be able to provide a warm welcome to everyone who enters our front door. And I might add that this welcome should include each new pastor. The environment that newcomers experience is importantly related to our individual actions.

Some acts of hospitality do require conscious decisions. We respond to requests to support missions through contributions of time and money. We agree to run an errand for a friend, or to visit someone in the hospital, or to take food to someone just released from the hospital, or ... We may invite students for a meal; we can actively seek to know others in the congregation better.

Such decisions are somewhat analogous to those made in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Like the priest or the Levite, we sometimes (often?) "pass by" opportunities to be hospitable. Nonetheless, each of us aspires to be a Good Samaritan. Jennifer Herdt preached a

sermon on this topic about five years ago (August 2012), which I commend to your reading. I will not try to summarize it here, except that one of her points is that we often pass by, but “Christians of all people shouldn’t be surprised to discover that our virtues are frail ...”

I want to emphasize the importance, in my mind, of the random, unplanned acts of hospitality. We read, see or hear something that we appreciate and say so. We greet someone, perhaps a stranger, with a smile and a friendly “hello.” We allow a person in the grocery store line, with just one item, to go ahead of us.

I am sometimes embarrassed, or not sure how best to respond, as the recipient of an act of hospitality, but it is appreciated. I have also had experiences of being thanked for something I said or did many years ago, but had forgotten. The individuals in the Washington choir of 40 years ago have surely forgotten me, but I have not forgotten their hospitality.

How do we strengthen this facility? How do we make it a part of our growth as Christians? An analogy for me is experiences as a student and as a teacher. I taught econometrics for doctoral candidates in applied economics for over 30 years. The students were bright, committed people, but the deeper meaning of a topic was often difficult to teach and for the students to grasp. There was a tendency to memorize the mathematics while a fuller understanding took time to develop. Teaching was also a dynamic process. In preparing for class, I sometimes gained a new insight or idea about presenting a topic, or a student’s question stimulated a new insight. We have the potential to continue to grow and learn in our professional lives, and so it is with our often feeble attempts at being a Christian. Hopefully growth as a Christian is also a lifelong process.

So, back to the random acts of hospitality. They are the spontaneous actions that, although situation-specific, require little time or effort. They may not be memorable to us, but are important to the recipient. We should be alert for these opportunities. My vision is that of a little angel (the Holy Spirit?) hovering nearby reminding me that this moment is an opportunity to be hospitable. I remember a case perhaps 35 years ago when a graduate student from my Cornell Department was present at a Chapel fund-raiser and the conversation gave me an opportunity to invite him to church. He became a regular. The context provided an opportunity for an invitation that I would not have been comfortable making on campus. I have also found it relatively easy to tell people that I attend the Chapel, which has the potential to generate interest in us. We certainly miss opportunities to make invitations; our challenge is to develop a sense, a habit, of seeing them and acting on them.

We live in a community with change associated with the academic year. Each summer new faculty and students as well as visitors are arriving, and of course others are leaving. Forest Home Chapel is embedded in this seasonal ebb and flow. Although the Chapel started over 100 years ago to serve the nearby Forest Home community, it has evolved to serve a much larger community. Indeed even in the 1920s, the Chapel had laity and pastors interested in international work, such as Roy Smyers and Lossing and Pearl Buck.

Congregants have come from many states in the Union and indeed from other countries in the world. We have had visitors from Korea and China. A pastor in the late 1980s—Michael Chitewere—was from Zimbabwe. Also, over the years, the Chapel has attracted students, who have contributed importantly through their presence and talents. The current congregation represents a variety of faith traditions, and many in the congregation are not associated with higher education. I value this diversity, and hope that we can continue to foster it.

In closing, I want to emphasize that hospitality does indeed mean welcoming all. Those of us who are regulars must be alert to the opportunities to make invitations to the Chapel and to offer a warm welcome to those that enter our door. Hospitality is an important component of being a Christian. As Galatians says “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”
Amen.

W. G, Tomek

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