

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 17, 2016

What is hospitality? Is it possible to provide for others and fail to be truly hospitable? Hospitality is central and simple, but indeed a great challenge.

The African Methodist Episcopal, (AME) churches in South Carolina and elsewhere have a goal to be welcoming and open to the people who come through their doors. Over a year ago, a young white man walked into Emanuel AME church in Charleston, sat with them during a Wednesday night Bible Study for an hour and then killed a number of them with a gun he was given on his 21st birthday. Several weeks later at a church 100 miles from Charleston, another young white man walked into a Wednesday night Bible study. He seemed a bit edgy and the rest of the folks gathered were nervous but worked hard to focus on Scripture. One of their previous pastors was killed the night of the shooting in Charleston. But they had made a decision to be welcoming and when the young man comes from time to time, they do welcome him, hoping for the best in his intentions. As the new pastor of Emanuel AME said at a Bible Study in January, "If you are not willing to die for what you believe in, you're not ready to live." Her words go on, "So when I stand here, look, I don't care how big you are, I really don't care how tall you are. I don't care what you're packing. I got something better to do. OK?" Emanuel is a 5 minute walk from the harbor where 40% of North America's enslaved Africans arrived. One of Emanuel's trustees reminds us, "Tragedies happen to black people since the history of black people in this country. Terrorism to black people isn't new. It's old. It's new to white people. But it's not new to black people." And so they struggle on to welcome and show hospitality, following the lead of Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus and the women of the New Testament.

Abraham and Sarah welcome the strangers. They don't just reach in the fridge and pull out some tasty leftovers. No, start to finish they provide a meal which easily costs a half day's labor. And I bet the meal was delicious. Those men were walking through desert. No streams, and depending on the time of year, there might be some green amongst the rocks, but otherwise, just brown. Sarah and Abraham extend the table to strangers who gladly receive their hospitality. Then, the table of welcome is suddenly turned, and the promise of conception and a child within a year is granted to these two who have plenty of household, but no biological family.

True hospitality and welcome are always mutual. Love goes both ways. Space provided, space received. There will always be worries and distractions. Is it not how we press on beyond them? Abraham makes space for these travelers in a barren land. Sarah listens closely through the tent walls, her laughter at their news of abundance and fertility—she is listening. Her laughter, regardless of how she laughs, reveals she cares deeply. She is either filled with joy, or cynicism, but she cares. Their words matter. Will their grace come true? Time will tell. Each day passes, the child grows with the hope and the promise of life. Life grows with hospitality and welcome.

So, Mary and Martha. . .In providing for the guests, Martha has gotten distracted from making space for the guests. Mary has made space for Jesus. Mary is practicing open hospitality with her presence. In her willingness to break with her traditional role, she sets aside worry and distraction. Martha's efforts are certainly appreciated, but both sisters have this one chance to listen to Jesus in this moment. Right now. In time, the food and arrangements will pale in comparison, not because the effort is not valuable, but because the moment with Jesus is priceless. Quite frankly, everything else can wait. Something important is happening in this moment and Mary chooses to be part of it.

We all need to be reminded in our busyness to focus on this moment of welcome and peace. Every moment in which we are mindful is priceless.

In hospitality, is the value in providing *for*? Or is the true blessing sharing *with*??? Abraham and Sarah give and receive. Mary gives and receives. I trust Martha does as well. Jesus is our example of giving and receiving. He is blessed by Mary's attention. We are blessed in the give and take of communion's fellowship. We tell one another with our words and actions, "You are important and I want to make space for you, right here, right now. Everything else can be moved aside. You are what is important in this moment." When we so value the people around us, we extend the welcoming presence of Christ.

May we all continue to struggle against our distractions and worries and truly welcome the strangers and friends around us. Thanks be to God.