

Say The Word And We Shall Be Healed: A Sermon About Radical Hospitality

The Rev. Rob Shearer + June 14, 2026 + Pentecost +3 + Gen 18:1-15, Mt 9:35—10:23 (esp . Matt 10:9-23) + TogetherWeWorship.ca

About 10 years ago, in response to an extreme housing crisis, the mayor of Victoria BC, made a bold proposal in the press. What would happen, she asked, if homeowners who had an extra room or two might consider welcoming in those who need a place to live into their space?

The response from the pundits was harsh and swift. In a society all too often rooted in preserving and protecting one's personal space - how dare the mayor make such an imposition, they said. "Sadly, it's very dangerous and it's very naïve," one city councillor said at the time. *[pause]*

Now, whatever you might think of the mayor's proposal, I would like to suggest today that our sacred texts and traditions, both Hebrew and Christian, would most certainly vindicate her.

Hospitality – the idea of welcoming a *stranger-in-need* into your home was, and is, in some cultures, a foundational part of what it means to be truly human. Many ancient middle eastern communities - many Indigenous communities, rural communities, and communities in the 2/3rd's world still practice these ancient ways of hospitality. *[pause]*

Our Hebrew scripture story, today, takes place in the heat of the day of ancient Palestine. The ancient matriarch Sarah and patriarch Abraham end up offering hospitality to three strangers; who are, from the get-go, identified as 'the Lord'.

In spite of them not knowing who these strangers were – whether they were friend or foe, whether they posed some danger, or not - the story tells us that Abraham, in respect, bowed down to the ground, asked for water to be brought and encouraged them to wash their feet and to drink. He then asks Sarah to make 3 cakes from the choice flour and heads out to the herd to get a calf prepared - and goes and find curds and milk.

A thousand years after Sarah and Abraham, the prophet Isaiah would speak God's words to the Hebrew people saying: "Is not this the fast that I choose:...to share your bread with the hungry and [yes -to] bring the homeless poor into your house;...Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly" *[pause]*

Just as Sarah and Abraham saw the three visitors as 'the Lord' - later Christian traditions would pick up this call to radical hospitality by seeing the unknown, expected stranger as a none other than a Divine guest. It's no surprise then that the most famous Ikon of the Holy Trinity, the 15th century work attributed to Andrei Rublev connects the Trinity to Sarah and Abraham's three guests, complete with the oak behind them.

St. John Chrys-ostom, a 4th century church teacher echoes Isaiah, and had choice words for Christians who loved to worship without a connection to those in need:

Lift up and stretch out your hands, not to heaven but to the poor; for if you stretch out your hands to the poor, you have reached the summit of heaven. But if you lift up your hands in prayer without sharing with the poor, it is worth nothing... Every family should have a room where Christ is welcomed in the person of the hungry and thirsty stranger. The poor are a greater temple than the sanctuary; this altar the poor, you can raise up anywhere, on any street, and offer the liturgy at any hour.

Jesus, in Matthew 25 speaks of Jesus, himself, as the one receiving hospitality in such situations: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” – and then the people ask Jesus, Lord, when did we do that? – and his response – when you do to the least of my siblings you did it to me”

And then in the letter to the Hebrews, Paul, perhaps with a nod to Sarah and Abraham’s hospitality story, encouraged that early community to “not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” [pause]

Now I’ve spoken a lot, thus far, about *giving* hospitality. It’s interesting that Jesus, when he speaks to his earliest followers about being sent out to heal and proclaim the good news with authority, talks about the inverse - that is, how to receive it

Some of you might have been in a situation where someone with very little offers you the choice offering. To me, that can feel hard. And, yes, it *can* be hard to receive – perhaps even harder than it is to give. My own experience in places like rural Mexico or West Africa or at feasts in Indigenous communities, where I don’t feel worthy to be given what I am - is that though it is, indeed, hard - even unjust - to receive, there is something so deeply joyful in these offerings and something changes in the relationship. Perhaps the hosts recognize the mystery in all of this.

However, that’s not the situation Jesus is talking about in the extended part of today’s gospel story. He’s speaking of taking nothing and having nothing to give. He says there:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

I can’t help but wonder how different Christian history would be if this ethic was followed in the history of Christendom, right?

Now, again, this passage underlines that there’s a cultural expectation to offer hospitality – which was, indeed, true in ancient Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures. The Sodom and Gomorrah reference is important, because, in spite of how it’s been incorrectly read historically, the key ‘sin’ of those cities is in not offering hospitality to the poorest among them.

At this early phase in Christian history, the assumption is that Jesus' ragamuffin crew of followers were poor wanderers with little more than a good news message and healing to share. Where most Greco-Roman conceptions of hospitality had some notion of reciprocity – where the host would receive something in return – be that a gift or prestige – it's clear here that Jesus' followers have little tangible to give – or at least so it seems.

Which points out one of the truths about think kind of hospitality. To give or to receive hospitality is an act of radical trust – and I'd suggest that this trust is at the very core of Christian spirituality.

Over time, the kind of home-based hospitality that I've been speaking about became institutionalized. Our homes of hospitality became hospitals, hospices, orphanages, shelters – taken over by church and para-church institutions and, even the state.

In New York City in 1933, the Dorothy Day, a then-recent convert to Christianity who had cut her teeth in radical movements for social justice and was trying to find a way to reconcile her social values with her newfound faith read some of these ancient teachings on hospitality.

She was convicted that it was the personal responsibility of every Christian household to live this and thus began to invite the poor to stay with her – initially as she was staying with her aunt and uncle - and started a 20th century movement to start non-institutional houses of hospitality – of which there are still some 250 of these Catholic Worker houses of hospitality to this day who are committed to what the church calls 'the works of mercy'.

Even so, Dorothy echoed the words of St. Chrysostom that we heard earlier:

No one asked us to start an agency or an institution of any kind. On our responsibility, because we are our [sibling's] keeper, because of a sense of personal responsibility, we began to try to see Christ in each one that came to us... The smaller the house, the smaller the group, the better. If we could get it down to Christian families, we would be content. *[pause]*

As we ponder all these teachings, I don't want you to misunderstand. I'm not suggesting the Christian hospitality it is just another thing on an endless to-do list that, lets' face it, we're bound to fail at.

I'm also aware that not all of us have the privilege to open our space in the ways I've been describing. I'm certainly not advocating for recklessness or a lack of boundaries that put one - or one's people - at risk. What I am suggesting, even challenging us to, is that we can – we must - delve deeper into this mystery than we usually do – and that it's best to do in community and not alone, as was the experience of the radically hospitable Acts 2 early church.

I wonder what it would mean when those opportunities pop up – be it at someone holding an 'anything helps' sign a stoplight, or when someone asks if we could buy them a meal? What is the Christian response? In this, I'm grateful that a mayor can remind us Christians that we each might be called to something more.

Finally, a reminder that Christian hospitality is a grace and a mystery and a spiritual practice – and this is evident in how, when it’s practiced, Jesus is revealed to us. Christ is always the host and we are the guests, as one communion prayer phrases it. Another line from a communion prayer echoes the words of the Roman centurion to Jesus: “Lord, I’m not worthy to receive you under the roof of my home - but only say the word and I shall be healed”

A huge part of the mystery is that, in opening up in that radical trust, we, the ones who supposedly are the ‘haves’ in the have and have-nots of the world, are the ones who are transformed – it is we who find the mystery of the living Christ.

It no mistake that most, if not all of these stories and teachings of hospitality in scripture speak of a transformative experience – not in some patronizing ‘I helped a homeless person’ kind-of-way but in a – *I* the one who offered a space, or a place or a cup of cold water was transformed by the very act of offering hospitality. That’s how I met Jesus. In the story of Sarah, she experiences laughter and fertility. Isaiah speaks of healing springing up quickly. Jesus’ parable speaks of eternal reward. I can attest this to be true.

And radical hospitality is exactly that – it’s radical – because it messes up the dualities of have and have not – of who is giving and who is receiving.

It calls us into a trust and surrender, into a profound encounter with the living Christ in a way that is not otherwise possible.

And so it is that we can pray, Lord, we are not worthy to receive you under the roof of our houses – but only say the word, and we shall be healed.

Amen.