

**Rev. Sharon Smith**

**Text: Genesis 18: 1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:8**

**Title: Welcome to me, welcome to you, welcome to God.**

Hospitality is an expression of our personhood. It is often shaped by our culture, our family of origin.

It is also determined by the openness in our heart to others – often an expression of our acceptance of the various parts of ourselves.

Welcome, Welcome.

I have become keenly aware that what I am rejecting in myself, I first reject in others.

What I am most critical of, sooner or later, I will see it in me.

I am learning to say welcome to the many, many parts of myself.

*See the welcoming prayer: <https://thechapelofthecross.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/140228-with-DFsermonWelcoming-Prayer.pdf>*

And at any given moment in time, I may have more or less capacity for welcoming others – be they strangers or friends.

Hospitality is an expression of the compassion of Christ.

It is not the same as entertaining guests in our homes – having everything in place, serving the best food and wine, matching napkins with spring flowers at the centre of the table. Don't get me wrong this has its place.

But hospitality – is a value and an expression of the gospel that opens us up to vulnerable strangers.

It opens us up to the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships.

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The Matthean community, the receivers and holders of Matthew's gospel, it seems, were called, among other groups, to welcome Jewish strangers. Note that in the gospel of Matthew it is also written that the gospel of Christ was to be preached to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

But here in this text – we see a particular invitation.

Not an easy task. There was at the time competition between Matthean Judaism and formative Judaism in the synagogues.

The author of the Gospel would have expected conflict in multiple cities, much like the scenario portrayed in Acts.

The study of Torah was central to the identity of formative Jewish synagogues, and so the author of Matthew also expected faithful disciples to learn and follow the Torah as interpreted by Jesus.

*The missional audience of the Gospel of Matthew*  
*By: Ulrich, Daniel W. Source: The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 69 no 1 Jan 2007, p 64-83.*

Hospitality, to those who think differently to us, is exceedingly hard. For we are not called to change people. We are called to have compassion and to bring the peace of Christ to others. Physical peace, emotional peace, spiritual peace. Offering our very presence. The ministry of presence.

It is so hard for us to simply be in the midst of chaos. Not to try to fix the situation, managing our own sense of overwhelm and inadequacy. Being with someone else, especially someone in a vulnerable position – requires so much self-awareness, self-management, self control, and conscious use of self – so that we simply be there in our own skin – and offer love and care, without caretaking.

There are times when someone or their circumstances invites us to do, to take action on their behalf, but most of the time, simple presence is enough. An openness of heart and a posture of side-by-side companionship.

When I find myself in situations where I am uncomfortable just being, and feel the urge to do, not sure if my help is really needed or wanted. Even and maybe especially unsolicited advice is not being called for.

I use the serenity prayer:

**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change  
The courage to change the things I can  
And the wisdom to know the different.**

My friends, why is it that we doubt the gift of presence so much?  
Being there respectfully with someone, as they work out what to do, is a huge gift.

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A Model of Companionship was developed in 1987 on the streets of Seattle as a ministry of outreach to persons who were living in homeless and struggling with serious mental health issues by Rev. Craig Rennebohm.

What is Companionship?

Companionship is a ministry of presence, a relationship responding to isolation and suffering and supportive of healing and recovery. Companionship welcomes the stranger, building a circle of care with individuals who are facing emotional and mental health challenges.

Companionship is rooted in our natural capacities as human beings to be sensitive, compassionate and concerned.

- Companionship is a basic human relationship between two equals
- Companionship is a response to suffer; it is not about “fixing it”
- Companionship is a Public Relationship
- Companionship aims for mutuality
- Companionship recognizes our need for a circle of care and support

Listening to Dr Bonnie Henry (BC’s public health officer) this week, I am grieving over the lives lost these past months to drug overdose, I am more convinced that being there for people, even when they are doing something we disagree with or feel uncomfortable with, can save their life.

Being disconnected and all alone when we are in turmoil is so hard.

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In Genesis, we read of Abraham, in the desert responding to the movements of the diurnal variation of the sun’s temperature. During the heat of the day travellers seek shade and rest.

Because of his life in the desert, Abraham instinctively knows what to offer his guests. He is a symbol of the perfect Near Eastern host – offering generous hospitality. And in the midst of this interaction – as Abraham is openly giving to these three guests – he surprisingly receives. He has an encounter with Yahweh – the God of Israel.

This is one of the first formative stories we have in the biblical tradition on hospitality – and it is unambiguously positive about the welcome of strangers. And it connects hospitality with the presence of God – with promise, with blessing.

It is amazing how those who practice hospitality – the welcome of strangers – have their own set of stories:

- The food stretched miraculously
- The resources appeared just when we needed them
- People came unexpectedly and brought exactly the skills required that day

Situations of risk that turned out to be filled with blessing.

Somehow the One who is filled with compassion, meets us, fills us and even blesses us, as we offer the gift of presence to others – whatever it is we have to offer.

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*Christine Pohl Making Room – Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*  
[https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/449430.Making\\_Room](https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/449430.Making_Room)

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Sarah is very aware of her aging body and the limits of her capacity. She laughs at the thought of her opening up to something new in her life.

A hospitality in her own heart for a gift that she was about to receive, is a struggle.

I am so mindful of the narratives around us in our St Catherine's community of aging and purpose.

Opening our hearts to the possibility of new gifts, no matter how small, is risky and yet can be so rewarding, life giving, a breath of fresh air!

I think of our Wednesday contemplative practice group.

Two years ago, we were 6 people – mostly elders in the community - meeting each week on Wednesday morning for prayer, silence, reading and Eucharist. It was warm, it was close, it was familiar.

And then gradually we were invited to open up to new possibilities.  
And we said welcome. A little haltingly at first, but nevertheless Welcome!

There were some niggly moments as we moved into some unfamiliar territory, trying new contemplative practices, welcoming people in:  
who were younger,  
who thought differently,  
who needed different things.

Last Wednesday we were 15 people on Zoom – from all walks of life, different ages and stages, holding space for our unique journeys, our unique interpretations of God's work in our lives. Managing ourselves and our reactions to difference as we made room for each other.

And this is evidence that we have deepened in experiencing God's love,  
We have deepened in our acceptance of the parts of ourselves,  
And we are opening up to hospitality of others.

Hospitality as an expression of the compassion of Christ.  
To all the dimensions of human existence in relationship.

Thanks be to the welcome of God.

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**Eucharistic Reflection: Relationship with ourselves – forgiveness and shame**  
Reconciling us to God, to others and to ourselves...

We come to the table to be redefined:

- It reminds us that we are beloved.
- That each part of us is welcome.
- That all that we have done, intended to do or be is received.
- That there is grace for all the hurt we have absorbed from others
- There is forgiveness for all the wrong we have caused.
- It is a place of breathing again.
- Of letting go. Of starting again.

We say these words:

- When we turn away from you – you did not cease to care for us
- You do not abandon us.
- We thank you for your love
- You created us to love you, to love each other as we love ourselves
- in the ocean of your steadfast love you bear us
- You bring us out of error into truth
- You open the path from brokenness to health, from fear to trust, from pride and conceit to reverence for you.
- This cup, is my blood for the forgiveness of sins
- When we injure others,  
you confront us in your love  
and call us to the paths of right relatedness.

We come to the table, often with divided hearts.

We receive the mystery of grace and welcome. We exhale.

We are knitted together again.

And we walk away ready to live into this healing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.