

ENTERTAINING JESUS = ENTERTAINING STRANGERS
SEPTEMBER 29 AND 30, 2018
MARK 10: 40-42; MATTHEW 25: 35-40

How wonderfully author Henri Nouwen has given expression to the call to Christian hospitality when, in his book “Reaching Out” he prophetically stated, “Our society seems to be increasingly hard and full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm.”

Nouwen goes on to say: In our world the assumption is that strangers are a potential danger and it's up to them to disprove it. Our hearts might desire to help others -- to feed the hungry, offer a cup of cold water to the thirsty, visit the sick and imprisoned and offer shelter to travelers -- but meanwhile we've surrounded ourselves with a wall of fear and hostile feelings, avoiding people and places where we might be reminded of our good intentions.

And our fear and hostility isn't even limited to thieves, or drug dealers, or immigrants, or those who look different and act different from us.

In a world so pervaded with competition, even those who are close to each other -- classmates, teammates, colleagues -- can become infected by fear and hostility when they experience each other as a threat to their professional or intellectual safety.

Moving from fear and hostility to hospitality is hard.

Jesus referred to hospitality often in his preaching and teaching. Jesus' hospitality was radial. The man would talk to anyone, eat with anyone, socialize with anyone, and visit whomever He pleased. He didn't stand on ceremony or appearances.

He told stories of the Good Samaritan who showed hospitality to an enemy; and of a banquet to which all are welcome and invited; he made the welcome of all God's children a matter of welcoming him. And in today's Scripture, Jesus said that whenever we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick, or visit the prisoner, or welcome a stranger, we've done it for him.

So why are we so hostile? Why are we so afraid?

We're conditioned early on in our lives to turn our heads and run in the opposite direction from strangers. It becomes very human and very normal to be wary of the stranger. We like to stick with our own kind, to protect our immediate circle of friends and family; to be wary of the outsider; to avoid the stranger who somehow comes in our midst. Everybody we meet seems to want something: directions, assistance, comfort, some spare change.

To be human on this planet is to navigate suspicions about other people. That includes everyday people we encounter in our neighborhood, work, school or here at church. As

rational as we like to imagine ourselves, we are still animals often demonstrating a biological instinct for survival.

We're wired to defend ourselves against threat, even if it's imagined. Those reptile-like parts of our brains are still the most reliable, ready to fight or flee or freeze.

Some hostility develops naturally from past experiences. We've been hurt. We've been betrayed. We've been threatened. We've been taken when we've tried to reach out with compassion.

But some hostility is conditioned, evident in the language people use to dehumanize another.

Reaching out to our fellow human beings in some ways feels more difficult today than in years past. Even when we come with no past experiences, even when we come *not* in the middle of a difficult political climate, even when we come to regular human relationships, we carry some hostility.

Can you picture yourself out somewhere – maybe at a shopping center, a park, a ball game, and this conversation takes place:

“Excuse me. Can I tell you something?”
What?

“Can I tell you something?”
No, I'm in the middle of something here. Can't you see?

“Well..I..I... just wanted to... well.”
No, I'm busy.

And we go our separate ways.

I'll never know what it was that person wanted to tell me.

Maybe it was that I had a bug on my shoulder or that they knew someone, once, who reminded them of me. Maybe they *did* need some spare change. But I'll never know.

I walked in my direction and they walked away in theirs.

We're going to end up being awfully lonely people if we keep walking in *our* direction, all of the time.

There's a Lakota Indian proverb that basically says “Never criticize someone else unless you walk a mile in his moccasins.” We often say you can't understand someone until you walk a mile in their shoes.

Well, the thing is, I can't walk in their shoes and they can't walk in mine, no matter how hard we try. What I can do, however, is to suggest that we walk together in the same direction in our own unique, made for us shoes, and that as we walk, we talk and learn about each other.

We make assumptions about people, especially strangers, without ever holding a conversation. Without ever listening to what they have to say.

We do it to people all around us. Rich, poor, middle class, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, divorced, single, widowed, gay, straight, transgendered and on and on and on. We all have our stories, and the only way we'll find out about one another is to listen and talk with each other and try to understand; try to see Jesus in the other.

Helena Bala listens to strangers tell stories. Before she started doing this, she worked as a lawyer and, as a lobbyist in downtown Washington, DC. Helena had always wanted to have a job where she could help people. But somewhere along the way, she got sidetracked. Each day on her way to work, she passed at least five homeless people.

One of the homeless men she saw every day was Joe. He stood in front of her building with a paper cup, wearing a black tattered shirt. Whenever she could, she brought him boxed lunches that she'd pick up during Capitol Hill briefings.

One day she asked if it was all right to spend time with him and talk. As they stood together, she asked him about how he'd become homeless. Did he have any family? Where did he stay when the weather was bad? Did he often go hungry? He answered her questions in intense detail.

Then Joe asked her about her job and her life. And, she surprised herself with what she shared. And, he listened, patiently, grateful to have someone to talk to.

As Helena watched Joe shake his cup of change at those who would pass by, she began to understand. Sometimes people shot him dirty looks. But mostly people completely ignored him: no friendly smiles, no inquisitive glances. He was invisible.

That night, she talked with her partner about whether they could swing living on just one salary. The next day, she quit her job on Capitol Hill; and her new "job" was to listen to the "stranger" that no one else will.

Joe was just one person she listened to. She began meeting with strangers she found through an ad on Craigslist—offering them anonymity, a cup of coffee, and a friendly ear. She thought there were probably a lot of people out there like Joe who didn't have an outlet where they could speak honestly and without restraint—where they could truly be seen as themselves. It was an exercise in radical listening and compassion, in building a space where people could simply be themselves without fear of the judgment or stigma.

She interviewed a man who lost his wife to alcoholism and was struggling to rebuild his life without her. She spoke to a veteran who had lost both of his legs after serving two tours of combat abroad. She heard stories about sexual abuse and mental illness, divorce and death, addiction and disability — stories that left her in awe at the breadth and depth of humanity.

Meeting with Joe and hundreds of others taught her that we all struggle with something. We all need someone to listen and tell us we're not alone. She found a community craving for connection; a community of people waiting to be heard. In today's society it's easy to stereotype, to dismiss, to typecast, to categorize and put away. But, if we bother to dig just beyond that façade, to listen and look a little deeper, we can almost always discover a story worth listening to—worth telling.

It's not easy to walk beside another person, especially those very different from us, and this **can** cause us to have doubts and fears. But, we can't allow these fears to determine our responses, to limit our choices, to compromise respect and generosity, and to feed hostility. Encountering strangers may in fact be a privileged opportunity to encounter Jesus.

Let us pray:

Lord, give us the eyes and heart of Jesus to truly see our neighbors and the strangers we meet. Teach us what it means to love the stranger as we love ourselves. Forgive us for our fear, our doubt, our judgment, our disrespect, our silence. Help us to see you in each person we meet; and help each person we meet to see you in us. Amen.