

“The Ministry of Hospitality”

Luke 7.36 – 8.3

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 6 June 2004

One of the most moving occasions of my ministry in the Connecticut Conference of the UCC was a two-week trip to visit our partners in the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea. I was anticipating that it would be a great trip; it was my first trip to Asia, even though I’d studied a lot of Japanese history. What I wasn’t prepared for was the way our hosts “killed the fatted calf” for us. After our 17-hour non-stop flight from New York, they greeted us with welcome banners at the airport, then they whisked us off to an amazing restaurant with the most extensive buffet I’d even seen: sushi sliced to order; a myriad of noodle dishes; spicy meats that came in hot, hotter, and inflammatory; and a huge spread of desserts. And then the toasting and gift exchanges started.

For the next 14 days, they took us to museums, castles, mountain parks, seaside resorts, and we spent lots of time in churches, learning how Christians “do church” in a different part of the world. Everywhere I stayed, I was given the best bed in the house to sleep in, often displacing a member of the family. Every meal we had was something special: right down to the dried cuttlefish snacks!

Our Korean hosts, especially Pastor Lee Kyung Rim, killed us with kindness as they showed us their country. Some of what we experienced was indicative of Korean culture, but it also revealed the ministry of hospitality that we Christians are meant to embody.

Contrary to the statements of the Roman Catholic bishop of Colorado Springs, the communion table is not meant to be surrounded by barriers: the razor-wire of dogma and shards of broken creeds. During his life, Jesus did bar people from the table: he welcomed them! People like Simon the Pharisee were scandalized by this, just as some Christians today are scandalized by the fact that we in the UCC welcome people to our table whom they would exclude. My question is how we could dare to do anything else with this sacrament that binds all Christians together?

The table is the symbol of Christian hospitality; it is no accident that the two sacraments we observe in Protestant churches both relate to hospitality: eating a meal together around the table, and ritual washing through baptism. Hospitality is one of the acts we are called to as followers of Jesus.

Hospitality is also closely related to generosity of spirit and of wealth. This anonymous woman in the synoptic version of the story (who is identified as Mary of Magadala in the fourth gospel) spends a vast sum of money on the ointments with which she anoints Jesus’ feet. When Jesus turns to Simon and queries him – in good, rabbinical fashion – he frames the issue in financial terms. “A certain creditor had two debtors,” he begins. And when we ask God to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, the metaphor clearly has a fiscal ring to it.



The other element of this story that isn’t dealt with too often is the sensual or erotic dimension of the woman’s action. Imagine if some person were to kneel in front of you, take off your shoes and socks, bathe your feet with their tears, kiss your feet gently, wipe them dry with their hair, and then massage them with a wonderfully expensive lotion. It sounds quite wonderful, but it’s a pretty intimate scenario, isn’t it?! It’s far more erotic than John’s story of Jesus washing the disciples feet and toweling them dry.

How do you bring the fullness of yourself into the act of hospitality? Do you make an effort to greet people during coffee hour whom you haven’t met before? Do you make

a special effort to remember peoples' names? It's easy to fall into the trap of just talking to people you're familiar with, but I'd encourage you to open yourself up to others around you. It makes an immense difference in the culture of a congregation. When I was considering different congregations a few years back, I drove up to Vermont on a Sunday morning to be a fly on the wall and observe a church right near Dartmouth College that had a pastoral opening. I was able to walk into the service, be in worship for an hour, wait in line to greet the interim minister without anyone saying a single word to me. That experience made a deep impression on me, and one of the questions I often ask our new members is how warmly were you greeted at Plymouth when you were visiting us? Most reports are quite good.

A colleague of mine in Maine said that "you've never really been welcomed into a church until you've been welcomed as a minister." And I think that's true; you all reached out to me and my family wonderfully when we arrived almost two years ago. And I hope you will also make a special effort to welcome and include the 100 new members this church has received in that time. With growth like that, we need to be intentional about including new folks in the life of the church. We are growing fast, and one of the challenges we face is making an intentional welcome into our fellowship groups, our boards and committees, and our hearts to ensure that people feel warmly welcomed here at Plymouth.



Christian hospitality also occurs on a macro level. Refugee resettlement and ministry to new immigrants have been an important ministries of the church. Just over 100 years ago, the Congregational Church reached out to Volga German immigrants and helped them start new churches in the Midwest, the Rockies, and California. That's the reason this church is here today: because a bunch of people went out of their way to welcome new immigrants.

One of the most amazing people I met in Connecticut is Linda Carleton, a UCC minister with a specialized ministry in refugee resettlement. When Linda's mother died about five years ago, she inherited several hundred thousand dollars. And with that money, Linda founded Melita House, a lovely, large home in Guilford, Connecticut, that houses refugees arriving in this country. Linda also gave the house to First Church UCC in Guilford, and she and her husband Peter live at Melita House as resident directors.

That's perhaps the most dramatic act of hospitality I can imagine, and there are ways that we as a congregation and denomination can and should be considering to welcome people on a macro level, as well. I know that my predecessor, Fred Edmonds, gave an amazing gift of hospitality to Ban, a young woman from Iraq who has HIV, and who died in Fred and Carol's home. So, if you've been around Plymouth, you know what deep, Christian hospitality can mean.

The hospitality the woman offers Jesus, and the welcome of Jesus to sinners and tax collectors to dine at his table is a symbol of the welcome God offers us all. No minister can say this enough: ***you are welcome in this community and welcomed by God.***

I'd like to challenge you, as you come to the communion table this morning, to think of ways you as an individual and we as a congregation, might witness the welcome of God even more.

Amen.