

11-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Luetkehoelter, Gottlieb Werner (2005) "Practice hospitality," *Consensus*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol30/iss2/9>

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HISTORICAL SERIES, 3

Practice Hospitality

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(The Rev. Dr. Gottlieb W. Luetkehoelter – popularly and affectionately known as “Lee” – was Bishop of the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod of the ELCIC from 1986 to 1994; prior to that he had been Bishop of the Central Canada Synod of the Lutheran Church in America from 1975 to 1985. As Sessional Lecturer at the Saskatoon Seminary, 1994-1996, he explored especially the discipline of Narrative Preaching. This sermon was delivered at the Spring 2000 Graduation Exercises of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.)

Text: Romans 12:13b

The most urgent task of ministry is, of course, to announce the gospel. I recall the Slovak-Zion Bishop, John Adam, parading about in a T-shirt emblazoned with John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son...” He kept appearing in the same cotton top, meeting after meeting, reminding us of what is central. It was good to be reminded.

Paul now spells out what happens when this gospel fills us and takes precedence over all else. “Practice hospitality.”¹ It’s tucked away in Paul’s chapter on life in Christ. It’s important for us to ponder this exhortation of Paul’s to “extend hospitality to strangers.”²

On all sides, in every corner of our country and throughout the world, we are doing something other than “practicing hospitality.”

There is the tragic story of the Hildebrands of Winkler, Manitoba. Shad Hildebrand loved hockey and went to the arena every Saturday night. Then one evening he was hit by a puck and in six days he was dead. His father is grief-stricken, and wants his son’s death to serve some purpose. He wants arenas to be safer. But the town is resisting. It would cost \$40,000 to put in higher and stronger glass at hockey

rinks. Some are saying that every time you go to a game you accept some risk. But the father is not content, and intends to sue the town for the wrongful death of his son. This, he said on a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) broadcast on April 25th, could well result in his being shunned. In a Mennonite community, he explained, you don't sue one another. If he proceeds, he may have to sell his house and move elsewhere. But he is determined that his son not lose his life in vain.

So the town practices hospitality, but only if people conform to certain standards. In our day, hospitality is particular, not general. We welcome the conformers, the likeable, the cute. If hospitality is withdrawn, the Hildebrands can no longer live in their town. Hospitality is essential for each of us if we are to have peace and joy and contentment in our life. Every pastor depends on the hospitality of the congregation in order to carry out her ministry.

But around the world this elixir of life is rare, a gift given selectively. Recently I received three e-mails from National Bishop Telmor Sartison regarding the difficulty of practicing hospitality. The Danes have welcomed many Muslims into their country. Most Danish Lutherans are in favour of granting freedom of religion to all citizens. But these Muslims, who number about 100,000 and are more numerous than Roman Catholics (28,000), are going too far for many Danes. Sure, they're welcome, but do they have to shout their call to prayers from the minarets of their mosques so loudly through the streets – the *Danish* streets? Yes, the Danes know that church bells toll every Sunday morning, but that's different. There are five million Danes and 86% belong to the church, and the preferences of these "original" citizens should have priority in Denmark. Isn't that just plain common sense? Yes, it's nice to practice hospitality, but it's hard when people insist on being different. It's downright irksome to have to put up with calls to prayer in a foreign language in a town that has always been pure Danish and "faithfully" Lutheran.

Then there was a second Email about the situation in Sri Lanka. This island has been home to the Sinhalese for 2,500 years, but there are also some newcomers. The Tamils started arriving from India about 1,000 years ago! Now the Tamils, who are 20% of the population, want their own homeland, and the Sinhalese are resisting this division of their country. The radicals among the Tamils have formed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and since 1983 have

used military force to press their demands. The government would like to crush this movement, but so far has been unsuccessful even though it uses 27% of its budget to fight this civil war. One hundred thousand people have died in this conflict. The Roman Catholic Bishop, Oswald Gomes, has said, “We cannot allow the nation to destroy itself with this civil war.” The majority of the Sri Lankans know that peace is essential in order that their nation survive and prosper. But the way to peace, the way to practicing hospitality, has so far escaped them. And if they do not resolve their differences and respect each other, the killing and destruction will continue. Without hospitality, life is hell.

And there is a third message, from Russia. Mary Robinson, the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Human Rights, together with other members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, visited Russia in April 2000 in order to negotiate a ceasefire between Russia and Chechnya. The Russian Orthodox Church was angry with the delegation. The Patriarch said that the West doesn’t seem to see the atrocities committed by the Chechens. Several apartment buildings in Russian cities were blown up, allegedly by Chechen terrorists. So the Patriarch urged that “peace be restored in the region” and that “humane treatment be given to Chechen fighters who surrendered.” But he resented outside interference and was convinced military force was needed to handle this crisis. While the Patriarch would like to “practice hospitality,” how do you manage to do that when there is so much anger on both sides? It’s very difficult.

And then there is the case of 14-year-old Reena Virk. In 1997 Reena was swarmed by a group of teenagers in suburban Victoria, beaten, and drowned. Kelly Ellard allegedly stood on the head of Reena Virk and held her under water until she drowned. Kelly was sentenced to life imprisonment and must serve at least seven years. You see, there was a problem here. Reena wasn’t, in the eyes of others, attractive. Sure, hospitality is offered to those who are cute. But if you aren’t, you can become the target of a group which gives itself permission to abuse those who don’t measure up to its standards – and God help those who don’t!

What has Paul to say about this important, but difficult to produce, fruit of the Spirit?

We need to review this chapter of Romans. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”²³ It is tempting to be conformed to this world

and to live for oneself, but that self-centeredness will be muted after your encounter with Jesus. Disciples seek to be transformed to have a mind that knows and follows the will of God.

And what you will discover within yourself, at least in your better moments, is that you have a strong desire to serve your neighbour. You will see yourself as having a gift that others need, and you will be moved to share it. It is like the body which has many members, and each has a function which helps the other members to live. You don't hear the mouth say, "Look, I'm tired of chewing just so that the muscles can be strong and that big brain up there can function and the eyes can peep out and take in the sunset. I've had it with sharing." That never happens. So it is with the justified. "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another."⁴ So there are some who can prophesy, that is, discern God's will for the present situation; others who are good at ministering to the needs of others; some can teach; a few can exhort; others have the wherewithal to give; some can lead (maybe not as many as think they can); and some have a heart for helping (please let them be cheerful!).

But above all, let there be love (*agape*). Do not pretend to love. "Let love be genuine."⁵ This is the transformation of which Paul speaks. Bishop Anders Nygren calls love "the circulation of the blood in the body of Christ."⁶ This blood comes from Christ and nourishes every member and determines who they shall be.

This love which flows from Christ to the faithful results in their care for others. "Love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honour."⁷ That isn't easy and you'll be tempted to give it all up. But "do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord."⁸ Don't look to the person you are with to move you to love. It is not necessary that everything be smooth and cute and cuddly in order for "love" to exist and to shape all that we do. "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering."⁹ And when the trials continue, "persevere in prayer."¹⁰ That is the source of strength that courses through the veins of the believer. This contact with God in prayer nourishes our life.

But let's get down to plain talk. "Contribute to the needs of the saints."¹¹ That is to be assumed. Those who belong to the fellowship need to be cared for and to experience this love. But those filled with the Spirit of Christ go beyond helping the saints. "Extend hospitality to strangers."

And that is where we started, and that which we find so hard to do, and yet that is what our discipleship compels us to do, and what our poor, bleeding, battered world desperately needs. Difficult as it is to extend hospitality, it does happen. That is the power of the gospel. Now of course we know that faith is a living, active, mighty force in our lives; and we also know we backslide.

Henri Nouwen has a wonderful image of how this gospel works itself out in our lives. Henri tells us the story of a troupe of players who put on a wonderful performance on tender love, intimate relationships, and helpful deeds. However, off-stage the actors couldn't stand one another. "Those who kissed each other on the stage were tempted to hit each other behind it, and those who portrayed the most profound human emotions of love in the footlights displayed the most trivial and hostile rivalries as soon as the footlights had dimmed."¹²

When we allow the gospel to direct and control, we are like actors on stage, performing as Christ would have us perform. Of course we are sometimes distracted, but the Lord keeps calling and we keep re-entering the drama of being the Body of Christ.

But what, exactly, is this "hospitality"? Hospitality is creating space for the stranger. It is putting our gifts at the disposal of a stranger, and allowing that stranger to accept or reject our gift.

I recall listening to Father René Fumoleau, an Oblate priest, tell about his work in the North. He told of how inappropriate much of the mission work among the First Nations has been. At one time linens for the altar were shipped from northern communities to larger centres for washing – as if the people in the North were too ignorant and dirty to do laundry for the Lord.

He feels it is urgent that we finally "practice hospitality" in regard to the Native people, and this means, for him, that we shut up and listen to what they have to say. One day he was teaching a group the Ten Commandments. When he was finished he asked which was the most important commandment. He had in mind, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." Or perhaps, since it seemed a problem, "You shall not steal." Or they might mention, "You shall not commit adultery." But a hand went up. "The most important commandment is 'Do not shut the door.'" He was surprised. "Why do you say that?" "If you shut the door, the one who has come will die." That's especially true if it's 40 below outside!

He tells of asking a native artist to prepare a Christmas scene showing Mary and Joseph coming to a village, perhaps by dog-sled, and asking for shelter, "but there was no room in the tepee." Could he draw that? "Oh yes," said the artist. Three weeks before Christmas he asked, "Is it ready?" "Not yet." Two weeks, and again, "Not yet." Then one week, and the reply, "Not yet." So Father Rene said, "You don't want to paint that, do you?" "No," said the Dene artist. "Why?" "Because that would never happen in our village."

Hospitality is "opening the door" and allowing the stranger to enter. That needs to be the picture of our congregations. Of all the gifts which a congregation has to share, none is more important at this time than this gift of the Spirit, "hospitality," and often, to do that, we have to stop talking and listen!

Do you know that there are some who find our churches are so inhospitable that they are afraid to enter? Who are those who are afraid to come? They are those who have had the misfortune of having their sin exposed. Those who have a criminal record find it hard to make their way into our midst because they are afraid they will not be forgiven. They are afraid of rejection.

There are those who may have drinking problem. In my first parish we had an evangelism week and invited those who had never come to attend our little country church. The lawyer in town, who had a serious drinking problem, came to an evening service and sat and listened to what was going on with interest. And then, as the congregation filed out, one woman said to him, "And what are you doing here?" We never saw him in church again. Maybe she meant it as a joke. Probably, for she was a very decent soul. But I could feel the sting and cringed when I overheard her remark. She expressed what he feared. "They don't think I'm fit. I'm not wanted."

I have to tell you about another group that is afraid to come. It is the gays and lesbians. This is difficult for me. We have a son who is gay, and he used to attend church before he came out, and now it is difficult for him to attend, except on Christmas Eve, and then he comes late and leaves early. He's a doctor, and he tells me that there are people in his practice who are deathly ill, who desperately need the fellowship and support of the saints, but they don't dare go to church because they are afraid that they will be shunned and judged and found wanting.

We wonder if we will ever get it right, if we will ever manage to have a place where hospitality is genuine. That, of course, is the

purpose of ministry, yours and mine. The assignment is to stride into the midst of our prejudices and announce again John 3:16.

A pastor said to me, “The biggest task I have is to make each service different.” But that is not really the essential task of ministry – to be entertaining and eloquent and artistic. It is rather to usher the listeners into the presence of the One who “practices hospitality.”

We need to find ourselves beneath the cross, and look at the criminal on a cross next to Christ. He has been hung there because of his crimes against the community. Jesus does not give him a lecture, nor does he ask him to make promises. He turns to him and says, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”¹³

The world is, for many, for far too many, an inhospitable place. God grant that in this mass of humanity there is the leaven of the faithful, who have heard the gospel and now cannot help themselves. They must welcome the stranger.

Notes

¹ Romans 12:13b, RSV.

² Romans 12:13b, NRSV.

³ Romans 12:1b, NRSV.

⁴ Romans 12:5.

⁵ Romans 12:9a.

⁶ Anders Nygren. *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), p. 424.

⁷ Romans 12:10.

⁸ Romans 12:11.

⁹ Romans 12:12a, b.

¹⁰ Romans 12:12c.

¹¹ Romans 12:13a.

¹² Henri J.M. Nouwen. *Reaching Out* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1986, c. 1975), p. 50.

¹³ Luke 23:43.