



Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

The Right Reverend Dr. Geoff Peddle, M.Div., Ph.D.
Bishop of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

ANGLICAN DIOCESAN CENTRE
19 King's Bridge Road
St. John's, NL A1C 3K4
Telephone: (709) 576-6697
Fax: (709) 576-7122
Email: geoffpeddle48@gmail.com

Bishop's Pastoral Letter for October 2014

Dear Friends,

Today, I continue my series of eight letters to you on matters arising from and inspired by our Diocesan Synod this past May. As I stated previously, "These letters are not intended to be in any way binding upon you or our parishes but are intended to draw all of us into intelligent conversation on our relationship to one another as members of Christ's Body in the world. As much as anything I hope to ask thoughtful questions about our faith community."

My second letter is called **Our Church and its Hospitality**.

+Geoff

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Our Church and its Hospitality

The Challenge Today

Today we find ourselves removed a great distance geographically, culturally and historically from our scriptural roots in both the Old and New Testament. In recent years we have also seen a major change in the relationship between faith communities and the wider society in our part of the world. Roles that churches once fulfilled in education, health care, social services and community organizing and leadership have often been taken over by the state or have otherwise been diminished. To quote from my address to Diocesan Synod, “The place of clergy and religious leaders has moved from the very centre of so much of social life here in Newfoundland and Labrador to a place that is at the margins of social life if at all. The result for many churches and leaders, both lay and ordained, has been a role-confusion that ranges from nostalgia for the past at its mildest to outright cynicism and despair at its harshest.”

I also noted at Synod that in Newfoundland and Labrador churches continue to be places of shelter and meaning during major life transitions (Birth and Baptism/Dedication, Confirmation, Marriage, Death) but for a growing number of our people that relationship is not ongoing and regular in between those moments; and for a smaller number of people there is no longer any point of contact with a faith community. Churches can no longer count on a natural and familiar relationship with their own members, let alone with the world surrounding them.

My purpose in this letter is to propose a way forward for all of us that will not only offer the possibility of reinvigorating some of our churches but also establish and re-establish renewed and deeper relationships with the world around us. I am proposing that Christian Hospitality, based upon both scriptural and medieval practices and teaching, become central to our ministry as Christians today. I will begin by discussing the understanding of hospitality in scripture and in particular how the New Testament and Jesus understood it before then looking at how it was practiced in the Middle Ages and leading into today. This letter will be a journey through the idea of hospitality from the ancient world to the modern world. I believe that now is the time to restore this ancient and worthy practice fully to our common life as people of faith. Christian Hospitality can provide us all with a renewed point of contact with our world that is both authentic and transformative for all who encounter it.

A Greek word for hospitality in our New Testament is “*philoxenia*, combining the word for love or affection for people who are connected by kinship or faith (*phileo*), and the word for stranger (*xenos*)”. (Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:2). Acts of Christian Hospitality originally were thought of as acts of love for a stranger.

Christine Pohl, author of *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, believes that Christian Hospitality has become marginalized in today's Church and we need to recover the practice. She affirms the historical importance of Christian Hospitality and reminds her readers that hospitality provides a bridge connecting what we believe (our theology) with daily life and concerns. Christian Hospitality invites Christians to be connected with God in their every action. Welcoming the stranger must be understood as a normative biblically inspired practice for the Church *that is learned by doing*.

Henri Nouwen had this to say (From *Show Me The Way*):

At first the word, "hospitality" might evoke the image of soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations, and a general atmosphere of coziness. Probably this has its good reasons since in our culture the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered down piety than a serious search for an authentic Christian spirituality. But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings ... When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of the new-found unity. Thus the biblical stories help us to realize not just that hospitality is an important virtue, but even more that in the context of hospitality guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other.

Holy Scripture

I will not review in detail the scriptural warrant for hospitality but merely cite some of the most relevant passages. I encourage you to read them yourself. In the Old Testament hospitality can be seen vividly in the story of Abraham, Sarah and the three guests in Genesis 18. Abraham and Sarah open their home to the strangers and it turns out that one of the strangers was God who then promises to give them the son they always wanted.

In the New Testament Jesus' openness for all is clearly seen in his sharing with Jews and non-Jews, the clean and the unclean. Jesus' thoughts on hospitality may be inferred in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25: "... when I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me". In the New Testament we also have the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) which begins in this way: ... "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the

poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

And then we consider the Great Commandment of Jesus (Mark 12:28-31):

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The Middle Ages: A Meal and Lodging and Blessing

In the years that followed the Apostolic and Early Church, as Christianity spread out from the Middle East and matured, some of the most important work in Christian Hospitality happened in the religious communities that developed. The traveler frequently knew the monasteries and convents of the committed religious for their welcome. A traveler who came to such a place in the course of their journey could often be assured of a safe lodging for the night, a warm meal, and a blessing in the morning as they continued on their way. There was no expectation that the traveler would stay and join the community although many did. There was simply the commitment by the community to care for the traveler with a compassion and love modeled upon that of Jesus himself. Many monasteries and convents still offer lodging and retreats.

During those long years, at times of disease and famine it was not uncommon if a person in a non-Christian community grew infirm or sick they were expelled from their town or village and on their own. But that was not the case among Christian communities where their infirm and sick were cared for. And Christians often took in the infirm and sick of other communities. Such acts of hospitality were responsible, in part, for the growth of Christianity.

Consider Benedict of Nursia – Saint Benedict – who lived in Italy from about 480 A.D. until 547 A.D. and founded a dozen monastic communities, the best known of which was his first at Monte Cassino. Benedict's main achievement was his "Rule", containing guidelines for daily living and which contained a unique spirit of balance, moderation and reasonableness. At its core is the requirement for stability of life. What is significant here is that Benedict rejected all of the extremes that infected most monastic communities of his age; ascetic extremes of piety and discipline. Benedict and the Benedictine spirituality he became known for said that God was to be found in the common and ordinary life. His Rule was not even intended exclusively for clergy but for the laity who wanted to discover God in domestic and communal life with others, a life as close to the Gospel as possible.

Religious life, as conceived by St. Benedict, was essentially social and Benedict's Rule was occupied with regulating the life of a community that lives and works and prays and eats together. From their beginning, the Benedictine monks lived in a community that put emphasis on hospitality, offering refuge to all who came their way. Benedictine hospitality welcomed the stranger with love, and without judgment. Benedictine hospitality was also simple. It favoured natural actions that should be done without having to think about them. And because of their Rule – their way of life – they practiced hospitality *within* their community on each other so that they could be even better in offering such hospitality to the world around.

What is Happening Today?

Hospitality in the Church today takes many forms. One thing must be clear, however, that if we are to be true to the spirit of hospitality revealed in scripture, in the life of Jesus, and in practices leading up to the current age, hospitality cannot be used as a tool for proselytizing or conversion or church growth as tempting as that might be. Christian Hospitality is not based upon the expectation of anything in return, but is given as the natural and normal fulfilment of one's response to God. We engage in hospitality not for our own gain but out of our response to God. And that directs us to the question of our motivation: it should be carried out as part of our Christian mission in the world, naturally, normally, repeatedly, without any hope of reward or benefit, but simply because it is the right thing to do for Christians, as natural and normal as praying and reading scripture. ***We love because God first loved us.***

Henri Nouwen has suggested that hospitality consists of:

... the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open up a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. (*Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life*)

In *The Welcoming Congregation* by Henry Brinton he asserts that “the best practices of hospitality always include a site, worship, a meal, a small group, the work of reconciliation, outreach into the community, and new perceptions of God's inclusive love”. Christine Pohl states it this way:

God's guest list includes a disconcerting number of poor and broken people, those who appear to bring little to any gathering, except their need. The distinctive quality of Christian hospitality is that it offers a generous welcome to the 'least,' without concern for advantage or benefit to the host. Such hospitality reflects God's greater hospitality that welcomes the undeserving, provides the lonely with a home, and sets a banquet table for the hungry.

Although there are many fine examples of hospitality in our diocese today, my observations are that many are actually oriented toward our own community and its recognized members. Christian Hospitality ideally includes both members and non-members with a special welcome for the stranger. There are other examples of hospitality emerging in our church that show planning and intention where those engaged in hospitality ministry are actively trained and equipped so that they are at their best. We should also note that not everyone is suited to hospitality ministry and it remains the responsibility of the Christian community to ensure that appropriate persons are involved in this ministry.

Social Boundaries

If there is a “radical” nature to Christian Hospitality it is in the way that it shatters social boundaries. It is always a boundary-crossing event, within the community and without, transforming relationships. It says that the communities we form as Christians are not “members only” but open to the world. Consider again the root word for hospitality ... “*love of the stranger.*”

Paul J. Wadell (*Toward a Welcoming Congregation*) views hospitality as being counter-cultural, noting the difficulties associated with it: “In a world of terrorism and war, school shootings, road rage, and pervasive anger and discontent, it is no wonder that concern for safety and security frequently triumphs over hospitality to the stranger.” However, it is not necessarily the “stranger” who poses a threat. Matters of sexuality, gender and race can also be used to isolate persons. The list in some churches might also include divorced persons and those otherwise handicapped and challenged. I still remember a deaf person telling me that for them churches are “lonely places.”

In his book *Table Grace* Douglas Webster explores how simply opening up mealtimes to others opens one’s life to God. Webster believes that “the act of opening our homes and our lives to friends and strangers holds real promise for spiritual growth”. For Christians, mealtimes should naturally include the stranger at the table. Mealtimes can be key moments of hospitality. I used to tell the members of my last parish that you can change a life with a cup of tea and a raisin bun. As a parish priest I really only came to know a person when I shared a cup of tea or a meal in their home.

When we welcome strangers to our table (whether at church or at home) we change all of our relationships. Jesus was even attacked for his table fellowship. *The observation that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners was not exactly a compliment!* We do well to note that much of Jesus’ acts of hospitality are centred on the sharing of a meal with strangers.

Restoring the Practice of Christian Hospitality

Holy Scripture speaks of a certain shepherd rejoicing over the one lost sheep that was found instead of the 99 who were safe. A good shepherd is faithful to the sheep even if they are wandering all over the

place. We live in a world that is in constant motion with people moving freely and the ideal ministry for many of our churches today may well be a ministry of hospitality where the stranger is invited and welcomed and made part of the family for as long as they stay. But if we truly practice hospitality and love and compassion as our Lord calls us to many people will not want to leave our communities. To quote one theologian, I believe the church should not be afraid to “love wastefully” and to pour its love into the world to all who come its way.

A true shepherd is always on the lookout for wandering sheep, lost sheep, and wounded sheep for they are precious in the eyes of the Good Shepherd. Archbishop William Temple said it well when he wrote some years ago that the church is a cooperative society that does not exist simply for the sake of its members but for the sake of those who do not belong to it. Every single person who comes our way should be welcomed and cared for and fed. God’s love in Jesus is a life-changing love that transforms human relationships and human lives and brings wholeness and healing.

How are we of the church to respond today? How are we to shape the community of the church so that we recover the practice of Christian Hospitality fully? By simply being the Christian Church in the world and practicing hospitality in all that we do, loving both those within our community *and* those outside our community. To quote Jürgen Moltmann: “God as love is experienced not in large organizations and institutions but in communities in which people can embrace each other.”

I end with this prayer attributed to St. Teresa of Avila:

*Lord Christ,
 You have no body on earth but ours,
 No hands but ours,
 No feet but ours.
 Ours are the eyes through which your compassion
 Must look out on the world.
 Ours are the feet by which you may still
 Go about doing good.
 Ours are the hands with which
 You bless people now.
 Bless our minds and bodies,
 That we may be a blessing to others.*

My next such letter to you will be sent in late November. It will be called **Our Church and its Children.**

With my every blessing,

+Geoff