

Hospitality

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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In a corner of the sprawling market in Mexico City an old man named Pota-lamo is selling onions. Twenty strings of onions lay in front of him. A guy from Denver walks up and asks, "How much for a string of onions?"

"Ten cents," replies Pota-lamo.

"How much for two strings?"

Pota-lamo fixes his eyes on him and says, "Twenty cents."

"What about three?"

"Thirty cents."

"Not much of a reduction for quantity. Would you take twenty-five cents for three?"

"No."

"Well, how much for all of it, the whole twenty strings?"

"I will not sell you the whole twenty strings."

"Why not?" asks the American. "Aren't you here to sell onions?"

"No," replies Pota-lamo, "I am here to live my life. I love this market. I love the crowds. I love the sunlight and smells. I love the children. I love to have my friends come by and talk about their babies and their crops. That is my life and for that reason I sit here with my twenty strings of onions. If I sell all my onions to one customer, then my day is over and I have lost my life that I love – and that I will not do."

Living life in a way that places a higher value on relationships and community than it does on commerce and productivity – this is counter to how most of us have been taught. We live our lives selling onions. We greet the morning sun each day with our to-do lists. There is no room for hospitality in a life like that. (from Radical Hospitality, by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, about the Benedictine practice of hospitality.)

If you Google the word "hospitality" the first items to show up are all about the hotel and restaurant business. A dictionary will define hospitality as the "cordial and generous reception of or disposition toward guests." We have just welcomed nine new members to this congregation in a hospitable manner – hopefully that is how they have been treated all along and that is partly why they have joined.

But these are mostly surface forms of being hospitable. In our children's affirmation, "We are Unitarian Universalists, with minds to think, hearts to love, and hands to serve," I like to remind them every once in a while that "hands to serve" does not mean putting someone's dinner on the table. It is deeper kind of serving than that. Likewise, I would like to focus this morning on a deeper concept of hospitality, what some have called radical, or extreme, hospitality and what that could mean to us as individuals and as a religious community.

Hospitality, of the radical kind, is at the heart of the Benedictine way of love. But as the Benedictine monks and nuns like to point out, it was not an idea original to Benedict. The rule

of Benedict is based simply on the teachings of Jesus. “In my Father’s house are many rooms,” Jesus said to his disciples in the book of John. This passage is usually associated with the idea that there is room for everyone in heaven, but if we think of this house of many rooms as being our earth, now, the divine in everything and everyone that is, we can take Jesus’ words to mean that there is oneness, wholeness, in our diversity. In my Father’s house are many rooms. The message that we hear over and over again in the stories about Jesus is that of acceptance – acceptance and affirmation – of the poor, of the helpless, of those who are our enemies, of those who are different. There is wholeness in our diversity.

Radical hospitality is not about the social graces, but about mutual reverence. It is more than being friendly to strangers and guests; it can be a path to the spiritual depth to be found in real relationships. Hospitality is based upon the conviction that every life is sacred. Our Unitarian Universalist first principle states that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And so it should be.

Hospitality is not synonymous, however, with condoning all or agreeing with everyone you meet – it is about receiving, affirming inherent worth and dignity, but not judgment. This is what we practice in all of our relationships here at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst. In our fellowship, in our covenant groups, in our committee meetings, we are practicing on each other – listening without judgment, preparing to be better able to reach out to those perhaps even more different from us. Do we see the stranger as a threat, or as an opportunity? Can we replace our hardening shells with welcoming hearts? Can we learn to (or let ourselves) truly connect with others? Are we sincerely present in all of our conversations? Do we listen? These are some of the finer points of a radical hospitality: to offer an open heart, a stance of availability, to look for the divine spark lurking in every single person who comes through the door.

I really do believe that what each of us is looking for, all the time, wherever we go, with whomever we find ourselves, is acceptance and affirmation of the person, the divine entity that we are. I once read about a study that said the single most significant factor in determining the viability of a couples’ relationship was whether each person affirmed the others’ existence, or not. The psychologists put the couples in a room where they were supposed to sit and read together for a while. I’m assuming there were hidden microphones or one way mirrors, or something like that. According to the researchers, if one person laughed at something they were reading, for example, and the other person ignored it, that was not good news for their survival as a couple. If on the other hand, the laugh or comment was responded to, *even* if in a politely negative way (could you please be quiet, I’m trying to read), this was at least an affirmation of existence and worked for the couple’s favor.

Hospitality is about affirmation of the other, providing a place that enables both yourself and others to grow their souls.

One of the topics that has repeatedly come up this fall, as I know it has in the past, is that of congregational growth and the size of the congregation. Listen to these words by Bernard Loomer, an American liberal religious theologian, and see if you can understand his philosophy about what makes growth happen of its own accord. He could be talking about our size as individuals or in our communal identity.

“By size,” Loomer writes, “I mean the stature of a person’s soul, the range and depth of your love, your capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive and insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.”

What Bernard Loomer is saying is that size comes with the realization that our personal spiritual journeys are not complete when we just work on them ourselves. To really grow as human beings we need other people. This kind of understanding leads to a natural hospitality that attracts others without artificiality and grows a congregation.

“By glory, make room,” wrote Jean Rowe. “By grace, make room. By all that is in us, and with us, and over us, Spirit of Life that is all around us, little and big, make room, make room.” This is what we have said to our new members today and what we will continue to say as we find more guests at our door and our table – We will make room for you. We will make room in our hearts, in our lives, in our religious community. We will make room.