

A Friendly Emptiness
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Time for All Ages

I have a story today that comes from a long time ago in a land far, far away. No it's not Shrek or a fairy tale! This story comes from the Hebrew Bible. It takes place in the Ancient Middle East, a hot and dry land including many desert areas. This story takes place thousands of years ago at a time when people lived in cities along rivers where it was easier to live near an abundant source of water. Other people lived further out in the dry lands where it was easier to have herds of sheep and other livestock from which to make a living. This story is about a man named Abraham who lived in the desert with his livestock. He and his family lived in a tent so that they could pick up their house and move their herds to different places to graze. There were settlements where people lived in the dry lands but it was always near a well to underground water sources.

Abraham moved his house and his herds a lot but he really didn't go very far. There were people who traveled long distances in those days but not in cars like today. People in those days traveled mostly on foot and sometimes on camels or donkeys. They couldn't carry a lot of food with them because they had no way to keep it fresh. And in those days there were no McDonald's drive-thrus to pull into when a traveler got hungry. Food and water was always a worry for the desert traveler. Because of this the people of the desert had a code of hospitality that said that people like Abraham would help a traveler if they needed it, even if they were total strangers. In return, travelers knew that they had to be good to the desert people because sometimes their help was a matter of life or death!

So, hospitality was a practice taken quite seriously in Abraham's world. Here's the story about him in the Hebrew Scriptures: I'll begin where the God of Abraham makes a covenant with him – that's the same thing as a promise. God tells the elderly Abraham he's going to be the ancestor of a multitude but God doesn't say exactly how Abraham's 90-year old wife, Sarah will bear him children. Abraham doesn't worry; he resumes life as usual in the faith that God will keep the covenant. Sometime later, Abraham is sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day and sees three strangers headed his way. Utterly unacquainted with these men, Abraham jumps up to greet them. Abraham hurries to them because it could be that they are very thirsty and hungry, maybe even sick from the heat. Abraham then generously offers the strangers the choicest of his food, shelter from the blazing sun, and he washes their feet, a profound act of humility in those days.

Well wouldn't you know, it turns out these strangers are God's emissaries who have come to bless Abraham and Sarah with a child; in the expansiveness of Abraham's hospitality, God's covenant was confirmed. Sarah then laughs at God for thinking she could have a baby at her age but eventually a son is born to Sarah and Abraham and God

named the baby Isaac which means laughter. So, keep this story in mind because it's going to come up again in the sermon...

Sermon

In Marietta, Georgia, a number of years ago, I walked into the sanctuary of my home congregation with my best friend. We slipped into a back pew and started chatting before the service began. As we were talking, I noticed that a young woman was sitting alone in the pew in front of us. Because the congregation was small and I knew it well, I assumed she was a newcomer. So I leaned over, introduced myself, and asked if this was her first visit. She introduced herself – I'll call her Rachel - Yes, Rachel said, and it was her first time at our church and her first time in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, too. "Welcome!" I said, and sat back and immediately began to worry about how this young woman would experience the congregation and the worship service. As other congregants filed in, I watched to see if anyone would join Rachel in the empty pew. When the call to worship sounded and she was still alone on the pew, I could stand it no longer; I turned to my friend and said "Let's move up a pew and join this newcomer." I was already on my feet but my friend, still seated, looked at me quizzically and said, "No thanks, I'm good." Assuming my best friend would understand, I moved up and seated myself next to Rachel. I pointed things out to her in the order of service, told her she could skip the offering, and invited her for fellowship and coffee after the service. And when another friend of mine walked in late, frantically looking for a seat, I motioned her over to our pew and Rachel had no choice but to move over and let my other friend be seated. I whispered a quick introduction which brought on a welcoming hug and there our young newcomer was, sandwiched between two well-meaning but entirely over-solicitous church members. What I offered to Rachel as the proverbial stranger that day was not Southern Hospitality but Smothering Hospitality.

Now please recall Abraham's hospitality: three strangers arrive at Abraham's tent and he rushes to offer them food, shelter, and foot washing. Keep in mind, the biblical story has Abraham standing by after his initial offer of hospitality; he's on hand to see if the strangers need anything else but at this point he's not really palling around with them or imposing himself on their repast. Think about the expansiveness and graciousness in that.

Now imagine for a moment if Abraham had welcomed God's emissaries as I welcomed the young stranger to my congregation. In that case Abraham, after running out to invite the three strangers to his camp, might have said, "Okay, so now that your feet are washed, maybe you'd like to change out of your dusty and strange-looking clothes so you'll be more comfortable and fit in better with the rest of our tribe. And, of course you're invited to break bread with us but I'll have to guide you in our food customs so we won't feel uncomfortable with you at our table. I'll also give you a special blue cup to drink from that will let everyone at the table know you are visiting and that's why you don't know the words to the food blessing. And later, if there's story-telling, you may not understand it all because these stories have been told in our tribe for years and everyone here knows them well. Just try to follow along."

Indeed, if Abraham had behaved in the manner just described, the three strangers would have been so busy trying to follow Abraham's lead they wouldn't have been able to bestow the gift of progeny and a multitude of nations upon the elderly Abraham and his childless wife Sarah. The gift of the strangers would have been missed entirely; a gift that had the potential to change everything.

I am indicting myself with my satirical version of the biblical story. Yet, I'll bet many of you recognize what the satire points to in the way of misguided hospitality. With the young visitor in my church, I had a sense that I had gone a bit overboard but I didn't know the grievous error I had made in not letting her have her own experience of the worship service, for better or for worse. My Smothering Hospitality was self-serving. By my anxious insistence that our visitor not be left on her own, I was preserving the status quo of my congregation. I was trying to assimilate our young visitor into the culture of our church and in doing so rejected anything of herself she might have brought into our midst; perhaps even a gift that might change everything.

Quaker teacher, Parker Palmer tells us the meaning of hospitality today is couched in terms of gentility and personality. In contrast, the ancient concept of hospitality meant "a bond between utter strangers."¹ As a host in this way, the goal is to provide a place of openness and goodwill that affirms a fellowship of humanity. The words of another sage (Henri Nouwen) make this a little clearer:

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create an emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free...Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyles of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his [or her] own.²

The concept of bonding with utter strangers is counterintuitive to the way we are conditioned to be in our overly privatized culture; thus, we tend to either err on the side of coziness and over-familiarity or we err on the side of distance and neglect of the newcomer. Perhaps it's best to remember what hospitality is not: it is not an invitation to adopt the lifestyles of the host.

Parker Palmer suggests that the quality of congregational life together is foundational to a healthy church community. But churches tend to become communities modeled after what the outside world is not: warm, inviting, intimate, harmonious church inside, insulating parishioners from the cold, impersonal, conflicted world outside. The pitfall here is the need to maintain intimacy; without some aspect of public space, the church becomes an extension of private life; in other words, the church becomes an extended family.³

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians & the Renewal of America's Public Life* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), page 67.

² *Ibid.*, 68

³ *Ibid.*, 120.

If church becomes family, its members will begin to exclude those with whom they are not able to be warm and intimate. According to Palmer, “intimacy depends on social and economic similarities between people; [therefore] our church communities become preserves for people of kindred class and status.”⁴ A congregational preserve so to speak has a hard time tolerating conflict. An insular church wants to assimilate newcomers and therefore is not able to welcome the stranger.

We’ve all encountered strangers in our living but we’ve also been a stranger at some time, in some context of our lives. What is the risk of being a stranger in a foreign land? What has been your experience of being a newcomer in someone’s home, or a neighborhood, or a school, or some other institution? Were you greeted and welcomed? Were you ignored completely? Did you feel invisible or did you feel conspicuous? Did you feel you could share the gift that is you or did you feel you needed to keep your gifts under wraps? I have a true story about one woman’s experience as a stranger but, more importantly, as a stranger bearing a gift.

The woman is my friend Jane – she’s given me permission to tell her story. Jane was also a member of that Marietta congregation I spoke of earlier. Jane and her husband John had joined the church a few years after I did. They both were a great boon to our fledgling choir. Jane came into the congregation a warm, generous, and spontaneous person. As a soprano she could sing notes only dogs could hear. She brought a distinct vibrancy to our sleepy congregation.

A particularly endearing hallmark of Jane was her painted cards. She was a talented water-color artist and if you needed cheering up or if you were in some way particularly deserving, Jane would paint a greeting card just for you. Parishioners delighted in receiving them. Alas though, after about 3 years at our congregation, Jane’s husband John received an irresistible job offer in the Northeast and it came to pass that they moved away. Before she left, Jane gave me a painted card. The subject was tulips, “Friday’s Tulips,” the exact replica of a small pot of them I brought to her many Fridays before when she invited me to lunch. See what kind of person she is?

But a few summers ago, I had a rare opportunity to go to the Northeast city that Jane and John moved to. I arranged a visit and we had a grand time. As we talked, it didn’t take long for our conversation to drift to Unitarian Universalism and congregational life. I asked if they had joined a church locally and Jane sighed in response. “Well,” she said, “it’s been a challenge. These UU churches here are very different from the Marietta congregation...we’re finding we don’t fit in well. We’ve tried several and finally got comfortable with one of them.” Jane went on to say that in an attempt to get involved, she joined the Caring Committee, the one that keeps up with parishioners in need with cards, visits, and meals. At her first meeting, Jane told the committee about painting cards for people and how she would love to cheer people up with her gift of art. But apparently the committee didn’t listen closely enough because when it came time to send some cards out, the chair of the committee handed Jane the addressee information and

⁴ Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 120.

pressed a box of church stationary in Jane's hands. Jane said, "Oh I won't need these – do you remember, I said I would paint the cards." To which the chair replied, "Oh, you must use the church stationary, otherwise people won't know where it came from." Jane replied that she would use the church's return address but this still didn't satisfy the chairwoman. Jane offered a few more ideas about how she could offer her ministry of painted get-well cards but the chairwoman was just not interested. Disheartened, Jane did as she was asked but ultimately she drifted away from the congregation.

I was heart-broken to hear this story. I ached not only for Jane but for the church, too, that missed out on her gift – a small thing yet it was something which had the potential to enliven congregational life and keep it moving forward. You never know where these small gifts might take a congregation.

Henri Nouwen penned the words that are in your order of service: "Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyles of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his [or her] own." A priest at one time in his life, Nouwen knew the ancient desert code of hospitality as told of in scripture. He understood the scriptural law that guided Abraham and his people to be compassionate and hospitable to the stranger, to the alien in their land. We might imagine that strangers in Abraham's time and place were probably just passing through. But later, after God fulfills the covenant of a homeland for the Israelites, God reminds them that strangers will come into their land and even become alien residents among them. God admonishes the Israelites saying strangers should not be oppressed for "you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). This carries the implication of which Nouwen speaks - that being welcoming and compassionate toward the stranger does not mean assimilation. It means being expansive enough to allow the stranger to be who he or she is – and to allow them to make themselves anew in your environment. There is risk in this, a tremendous risk to the host; by allowing a stranger to make themselves anew in your familiar territory, you might be changed in the process! Think how it might have been if Jane's host church had let her create herself anew there!

In today's world, creating a friendly emptiness means making church a public space in some ways; achieving it is not easy and it's not risk-free. But if you are willing and able to try, it can be a grace to you and to those you welcome in. For this is where the sacred, the holy, the divine, where our highest aspirations lie: between us, between you and another. Yes, you risk being confronted by change in your homeland but nothing could be more noble or sacred than taking that risk. It is a powerful act of faith and love.

You might be wondering; the young woman, Rachel whom I over-welcomed into the Marietta church several years ago – did she return? Sadly, no. Who's to say why she didn't come back to worship with us again? There are a number of possible reasons. But that story haunts me to this day.

As we proceed into this New Year and into this brave new world, may we all look upon one another as simply human, simply fellow human beings. If we can do that then we may not need to fear, judge, categorize, marginalize, or turn away from others in our own

discomfort. Instead we could affirm the worth and dignity of every person. Instead we could enrich our lives with a diverse fellowship of humanity. Instead, we could create a friendly emptiness in our hearts, our minds, and our churches where each person we encounter is created free to be themselves, to be loved, respected, and free to share their gifts with us and with the world.

Imagine if we could.

Source:

Palmer, Parker J. *The Company of Strangers: Christians & the Renewal of America's Public Life*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983.