

The Fountain of Hospitality

Psalm 23:5-6

by Dan Schrock

May 7, 2017

*⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

I

Four weeks ago today, on April 9, United Airlines in Chicago removed a doctor, David Dao, from a plane by forcibly dragging him out of his seat. Other passengers filmed the incident on their smart phones and uploaded the video to social media. On the video you can hear the doctor screaming that he doesn't want to get off the plane because he has to get back home in order to treat patients the following day. The video shows the doctor with blood on his face, violently being dragged down the aisle and off the plane. Airline officials later said they needed the doctor's seat for an airline employee.

The incident caused an enormous backlash from around the world. The price of United Airlines stock fell in the markets. People talked about boycotting United flights in the future. Investigations and reviews were promised.

Depending on your point of view, you could call this incident many things. From one viewpoint, you could think of it as a public relations disaster, as an example of a giant, callous corporation taking advantage of the little guy. From another viewpoint, you could argue the employees were just doing their job (even if badly), or the airline was just operating within their legal rights to take a seat from a paying passenger and give it to an employee. Yet most people would agree that by nearly any standard of measurement, United Airlines' actions were inhospitable. Forcibly evicting a passenger for no other reason than wanting the seat for a company employee hardly counts as a supreme act of generous hospitality.

An approximate parallel in our congregation would be the following scenario. Imagine what would happen if our ushers grabbed a visitor from his seat in this

sanctuary, dragged him down the aisle and through the fellowship hall, then ejected him out into the parking lot—all in order to give that visitor's seat to one of our employees—to one of the pastors, to the office manager, or to the custodian. If such a thing ever happened in this congregation, we would be appalled—and the news media would justifiably report the scandal within hours.

II

God does not operate like United Airlines. One of God's core characteristics is hospitality. In the last few decades, people in the English-speaking world have done a lot of biblical and theological work on hospitality. 50 years ago, most English-speaking Christians did not talk much about hospitality. We Mennonites did a lot of hospitality by inviting other people into our homes for Sunday dinner, and by welcoming refugees, especially Mennonite refugees, from other countries. We did it, but we didn't talk about it much from a biblical-theological perspective. That has changed. Biblical scholars and theologians from many different denominations have now published oodles of articles and books on the theme of hospitality. Thanks to them, the church has recovered one of the Bible's great themes, as well as one of the core characteristics of God.

Nowadays folks often say that God is love. When people today look for a single word to express who God is and what God is all about, they often choose the word "love." It functions as a kind of theological shorthand that succinctly captures the heart of God. It's a good word because love is a core characteristic of God.

However, we could just as easily say that God is hospitality. Hospitality is so much a part of God that if we miss this key feature, we will have a diminished understanding of God.

For God, hospitality begins in the relationships that the three members of the Trinity have with each other. Traditionally we said the Trinity is made up of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Today we would be more apt to say the Trinity consists of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. We could also think of the Trinity as One God in Three Persons, and Three Persons in One God. Whatever language we use, we can say that the

three members of the Trinity are profoundly hospitable to each other. God the Creator extends hospitality to God the Christ and God the Spirit. In turn, Christ extends hospitality to the Creator and the Spirit. And the Spirit offers hospitality to Christ and to the Creator. Each is hospitable to the other. Each of them is both host and guest.

What kind of hospitality do the members of the Trinity offer each other? I think at least two types. The first type of hospitality is that each member of the Trinity offers their complete selves to the other two members. The members of the Trinity do not hold back from each other. Instead, they freely and willingly give all they are and all they have to the other two members. They give themselves generously to each other. It's as if they say to each other: "Here I am. I give all of myself to each of you without holding anything back."

The second type of hospitality is that each member of the Trinity gives the other two members the permission to be who they are. Each person of the Trinity is a distinct individual, with a distinctive role to play. For example, the Creator works primarily to create new things. Christ works primarily to save and redeem. The Spirit works primarily to guide and inspire and empower. The members of the Trinity acknowledge the unique roles which each of them plays. They respect each other's distinctive functions. They grant each other the freedom to be who they are and to do what they need to do.

In these ways, hospitality strengthens relationships among the members of the Trinity. Their hospitality for each other helps to turn them into a community.

III

Hospitality is not something the members of the Trinity keep to themselves. They do not hoard their hospitality. Instead, they share this hospitality with us and with the whole world. There are many examples of this in the Bible, but for now I only want to focus on one, the last two verses of Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar and best-loved passages in the Bible. Many of us have memorized this psalm, but even if we haven't, we know it well because we use it so often in hospitals and funerals. I suppose most of us associate Psalm 23 with dying and dead people.

But when I was working on this sermon, I ran across a scholarly article that helped me understand this psalm in a new way.¹ Verses 5 and 6 are really about hospitality, specifically God's hospitality. In verse 5, the psalmist talks directly to God: you set a table of food where my enemies and I can sit down and eat together in safety. You provide refreshing oil to rub into my skin, which has dried out from the hot Middle Eastern sun. You pour so much cool water into my cup that it runs over and spills onto the table.

In verse 6, the psalm shifts to another image of hospitality. Perhaps you remember the story in Genesis 18 when Abraham sees three strangers walking toward his tent, and Abraham eagerly offers them generous hospitality. He runs out of the tent and begs the travelers to stay with him, to rest for a while and to eat a delicious meal that Abraham will prepare. For Jewish people, that story became the gold standard of hospitality. If you want a picture of human hospitality in action, then look at Abraham, who pursued his guests with goodness and mercy. Here in Psalm 23:6, the author seems to be referring to that story back in Genesis. God, you pursue me with goodness and mercy just like Abraham pursued his guests with beef and fresh bread and water to wash their dusty feet. And you, God, will offer me your lavish hospitality for as long as I live.

The psalmist sees in God an example of generous, even outrageous, hospitality. How many of us would dare to host a meal in our homes where we invited enemies to sit beside each other at our table to eat beef roast and apple pie? Yet this is the sort of hospitality that God offers: free, abundant, and verging on the scandalous. And everyone is invited.

IV

About 15 years ago, I started taking a series of courses at a seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. Since I needed a place to stay while I was there, I contacted some friends in Atlanta to see if they knew of anyone who might have a spare bedroom where I could stay. Yes, they replied, we know of a fine Presbyterian couple, Rick and Robin Dietrich, who live near the seminary and have an upstairs bedroom. So for the next 4 years, I stayed

¹ Andrew E. Arterbury and William H. Bellinger, Jr., "Returning' to the Hospitality of the Lord: A Reconsideration of Psalm 23,5-6," *Biblica* 86:3 (2005), 387-395.

at Rick and Robin's house, where I learned what true hospitality can be like. I have never been good at hospitality—just ask Jenny—but Rick and Robin were outstanding. Picking up on my interest in all things monastic, they put together a half-day trip to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia, then for lunch took me to a restaurant locally famous for its authentic Carolina-style barbeque. At other times they cooked exquisite meals and were engaging dinner conversationalists. With what sounded like genuine interest, they asked about my courses, my family, and this congregation. They heard some of my hopes and fears. In everything they were unfailingly generous and gracious—and they would not accept anything in payment. The small table in their kitchen around which we ate so many meals together symbolized their hospitality.

I was profoundly moved by all of this. Neither before nor since have I experienced this level of welcome. Through Rick and Robin, the generosity of God reached out and touched me. I glimpsed the extravagant hospitality of God, the fountain from which all other hospitality flows, making us all God's guests.