

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Third Sunday of Lent  
March 23, 2003

**Hospitality to Strangers**  
**Leviticus 19:33-34; Romans 12:9-21**

It is the third Sunday of Lent, and this is a Presbyterian worship service,  
but I want to begin this sermon with a story about the season of Advent  
told by a Catholic Nun, Sister Ana Maria Pineda.

For decades, the bustling streets of the Mission District of San Francisco,  
have been the home of a diverse population of Hispanics and Latinos.  
Over the years, the Mission District has taken on the familiarity  
of the neighborhoods its inhabitants left behind in their Latin American homes.  
Throughout the day, the bells of St. Peter's toll,  
announcing the presence of the church in the district  
as the streets teem with the vitality of the life, culture, and customs  
of the Latino world.

In the evenings of late December,  
children of every age process down Twenty-Fourth Street,  
some with lighted candles in hand  
and others carrying on their shoulders statues of Mary and Joseph.  
Each Advent,  
the young and the old reenact the story of Joseph seeking lodging for his young wife, Mary,  
who is weary from travel and heavy with child.  
For nine nights in a row,  
children and adults assume the identity of the weary couple or of the innkeepers,  
processing around the inside of the church or throughout the neighborhood,  
from one designated site to the next.  
The ritual is known as *Las Posadas* (which means, "The Shelters")

At each site, an ancient exchange is repeated.  
Those playing the role of Joseph approach the inn, knock on the door, and say in a loud voice,  
*En nombre del cielo, buenos moradores,*  
*dad a unos viajeros posada esta noche.*  
"In the name of God,  
we ask those who dwell here,  
give to some travelers  
lodging this evening."

From the inside, a chorus of voices responds,  
*Aqui no es meson sigan adelante;*  
*yo no puedo abrir no sea algun tunante.*

“This is not an inn; move on –  
I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel.”

As Joseph moves from one inn to the next,  
the innkeepers grow angry and even threaten violence,  
while the night grows colder and the young couple’s weariness  
turns to exhaustion.

The anxious husband implores,  
“We are tired, traveling from Nazareth; I am a carpenter named Joseph.”  
Finally, he even reveals his wife’s true identity, begging for *posada* (for shelter)  
for just one night for the Queen of Heaven,  
but to no avail.

For eight days, the scene is reenacted.  
Finally, on the ninth day, the eve of Christmas, Joseph’s request  
moves the heart of an innkeeper,  
who offers the young couple all that he has left – a stable.  
Yet the stable is enhanced by the love with which the innkeeper offers it,  
and this humble place becomes the birthplace of Jesus.

In an outpouring of joy and festivity,  
those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper  
and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph.  
They sing and dance, share food and drink.  
The children are showered with candy and treats from a pinata  
and the community recalls once again  
how the stranger at one’s door  
can be God in disguise.<sup>i</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Hospitality to strangers  
has been at the center of the Christian ethic from the very beginning.  
Even the ancient Hebrew texts which are now our Old Testament,  
elevate hospitality to strangers to a place of prime importance  
in the life of the community of God’s people.

Abraham was a stranger and an alien living among the people of the land of Canaan.  
Later, in the 10 commandments of Deuteronomy,  
the Sabbath command goes out of its way to specifically include even resident aliens  
in the command to rest on the seventh day,  
remembering that the people of Israel were aliens and slaves in the land of Egypt.  
Later in Deuteronomy, the command becomes explicit:  
*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords,  
the great God, mighty and awesome...  
...who executes justice for the orphan and the widow,*

*and who loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing.  
You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

And in today's reading from Leviticus,

*You shall love the alien as yourself. For you were aliens in the land of Egypt;  
I am the Lord your God.*

This love of the alien was made tangible in ancient Israel  
by an economic provision instituted by law:  
the aliens who resided in the land were allowed to gather food for their families  
from the edges of the Israelite fields.

And so it is no surprise that,  
when the Apostle Paul sets out to describe the quality and character of the Christian life,  
he includes in the list of virtues and actions  
the instruction: Extend hospitality to strangers.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is my sense that, for the church,  
as we seek to be the kind of Christians, and the kind of Christian community,  
that Paul describes in Romans,  
most of us have no problem with the idea that we should be hospitable people.  
We are comfortable with the idea of hospitality;  
it's just the strangers who make us nervous.  
We are like the innkeepers of *Las Posadas*, saying,  
"Move on. I cannot open, lest you be a scoundrel."  
We would like to extend hospitality to strangers,  
but we just don't see any safe way to do it:

Yet hospitality to the stranger is needed today more than ever,  
in a world where diversity comes to our doorstep.  
Strangers abound!

We live in a culture that suffers from an epidemic of stranger-hood, and of estrangement.  
People are strange to us because of their race or ethnic background,  
their economic status, the style of clothes they wear, the dialect in which they speak,  
their religion, or lack of religion,  
or even just because they go (or went) to a different school than we do.

But even among people who are not strangers in these ways,  
there is a lack of openness, a lack of trust, a lack of genuine connection.

Sister Pineda also points out that

"we are short not only of tables that welcome strangers,  
but even of tables that welcome friends...  
...[and] in busy families, children find no after-school welcome home,  
and spouses find little time to host one another over supper."<sup>ii</sup>

One of the church's great challenges in our society,  
is to find ways for us to provide hospitality to one another,  
the hospitality of Christian fellowship,  
for people who just don't have time in their lives  
for one more thing.

\* \* \* \* \*

One place in our church  
where the practice of hospitality takes place on a regular basis  
is in our Youth Connection.

I had a chance to talk with our Youth Leaders not long ago about their work with youth.

We talked about their work in terms of a 'ministry of hospitality'  
in which they open the doors of the church, or the doors of their cars,  
and in which they open their hearts for relationships with young people.

They seek to provide a safe place for young people to grow,  
a place of knowing and being known,  
in a world of strangers, and estrangement.

They seek to provide a place where kids can be vulnerable,  
and can risk being themselves, being who God made them,  
and where they can learn to trust,  
where there is a safety net of friendship, and love, and continuity.

This is one form of the ministry of hospitality.

And tonight, at our Lenten Supper,  
our neighbors from Calvert Memorial Presbyterian Church in Etna  
are coming for dinner.

We will be hosting them at our table.

And – together – they and we are finding new ways to be a hospitable presence  
to the needy of our community,  
who walk the streets looking for clothing, and food, and shelter.

We don't have all the answers about how best to do this ministry,  
or how best to keep it going, with limited resources and big challenges.

But we believe that as we open our doors, our hands, and our hearts  
to those in need around us,

God will be present and at work through us.

And just as certain is the real possibility  
that if we choose to close our doors, our hands, and our hearts  
to those in need around us,  
we will be shutting out the presence of God  
who comes to us in the stranger's guise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julia Esquivel is a poet from Guatemala.

She has written a poem with a stunning title,  
which brings us back from our Advent story and once again to the season of Lent.

The title of her poem is

*Threatened with Resurrection.*

I will not quote the poem because I would first have to tell you  
the long history of the suffering of the people of Guatemala.

But the general thrust of the poem is that the *threat* of resurrection  
is “aimed at those of us who have some measure of power  
by virtue of the simple facts  
that we are alive,  
that we have food and clothing and housing,  
that we are gifted with education and work and income,  
and that we are therefore capable of acting on behalf of the millions of people  
who are...deprived of these blessings.”<sup>iii</sup>

Resurrection, in the Christian understanding,  
is resurrection *to community in the kingdom of God.*

If we believe in resurrection,  
we believe that we belong to an eternal community.

What if we saw every stranger as belonging to that eternal community,  
and knew, deep in our soul, that we would stand with that person one day  
before the throne of God.

The Christian ethic of hospitality is grounded in this conviction.

The good news of resurrection  
calls us to live today in a way  
that demonstrates the reality of the eternal community  
that God is bringing together in Christ.

The assurance of resurrection, if we believe it, removes our fear,  
so that we can move beyond safety, and protection, and self-defense,  
and begin to risk losing our comfort, in a hundred different ways,  
for the sake of the stranger in our midst.

The joy and the gift and the mystery of such risky living,  
is that as we open ourselves  
to extend hospitality to the stranger,  
we find ourselves face to face with our Savior  
who was born as stranger  
to the world.

---

<sup>i</sup> “Hospitality”, by Ana Maria Pineda, in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1097), p. 29-30.

<sup>ii</sup> *Practicing Our Faith*, p. 32.

<sup>iii</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 152.