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Lunch and Learn: Hospitality - Making Room Inside Ourselves for Another Person

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Lunch and Learn, October 5, 2016
SJU Quad 264, 11:30-12:30

“Today’s culture is increasingly hostile and suspicious toward anyone who appears to be different – especially when tragedy strikes. Our instinct is to bolt our doors and protect the ones we love. But deep within the heart of Benedictine spirituality lies a remedy to hatred, fear and suspicious: hospitality.” This is a quote from the back cover of Homan & Pratt’s *Radical Hospitality*, 2002, not today’s newspaper.

Patty Wetterling, on September 25, gave us an example of that *remedy of hospitality* by saying “every prayer, every candle lit, every flower, every porch light lit, every hug, every kind note – each and every one of you has provided us with the courage to move forward.”

I received this e-mail that the writer described as: “the first important lesson in how to treat people” she shared this story: “during my 2nd month of college, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: ‘What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school? Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50’s, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. “Absolutely!” said the professor. “In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say ‘hello’.”

Hospitality could mean graciousness, even common courtesies. My sister-in-law tells this story: She moved her mother to a nursing home to get the care that she needed. She said to her mother, it will help if you say ‘please’ when you need someone to do something for you and ‘thank you’ when they have done something for you. And her mother said – do you mean every time?

Many people who visit Saint Benedict’s Monastery leave expressing gratitude for the peace they feel here, for the hospitality, for their feeling at home. Gail from Vermont spent a couple days in our hermitage and when she was getting ready to leave she thanked for the order she found here! She said when I go home and remember you I will think of you my Sisters who pray and the love you show each other and I thank God for the Order I found here.

I was thinking more about what Order might mean. It could mean the regular schedule. It could also mean letting people know our plans for the day. It could mean showing up at the time we said we’d show up. It could mean keeping a good balance in life – time for oneself, time for prayer, time for work, time for fun, time for leisure, taking time

to be leisurely at meals, for example. This is a kind of hospitality to oneself. This is as important as extending Hospitality to others.

A group of third graders visited the Monastery. Sister Lisa did a revised Noon Prayer with them in our Oratory – not with the Sisters. One boy was sitting next to his teacher (that may tell us something right there) after the prayer the teacher told me that at one point this little boy said to her “it is so beautiful here, I don’t think I can be naughty!” So maybe beauty is another element of hospitality!

Verna A Holyhead, a Good Samaritan Sister in her book, the *Gift of Saint Benedict*, says this, “The hospitality Benedict teaches is not a social event but a holy event. It is costly, not in terms of money, but in the demands it makes on our hearts, our time and our personal resources. In each of us there is some inner homelessness, some alienation from ourselves and one another that longs for a welcome. Benedict asks that we become a shelter for one another, accepting each other with our personality, gifts and physical resources. Not to extend such a welcome is to remain ‘strangers’. Sister Verna continues, “Hospitality begins in small ways with people of easy approachability, with warmth rather than polite boredom, with friendly words rather than officiousness, with graciousness rather than rudeness, in any of the numerous meeting and community situations....”

For me, offering hospitality often gives gifts to me too. If I’m with someone at Liturgy of the hours, finding pages etc. the words of the Psalms take on whole new meanings and strength. Part of it is hearing the words as the guest may be hearing them. One time a young Presbyterian Minister was with me at Morning Prayer. We prayed Ps. 51, which I have prayed many times. I know it is about repentance and pleading with God. But this time 2 verses stuck out for me as though they had never been there before, “You love those centered in Truth”, and then “Fill me with happy songs!” – that wasn’t ever there before either!

And Jane Tomaine in her book, *St. Benedict’s Toolbox*: “The truth is, that we can be manipulative and self-serving. We disregard another person’s viewpoint. We consider others as annoyances that must be dealt with. We fail to see *need* around us. We close our fists and hold in our love. In short we become self protective and, in the process, miserable. Respect, care, absence of judgment, encouragement, welcome, friendliness, ministering to the needs of others all are part of Benedictine hospitality.

Benedict instructs us – the abbot or Prioress and the whole community – to *wash the feet of all guests*. One of our Sisters tells the story of her grandniece married here in the Abbey Church. At the end of the ceremony or Mass, they asked their guests to sing the Servant Song by Richard Gillard:

“Let me be your servant.
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant, too

We are pilgrims on a journey,
We are partners on the road.
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night time of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you;
Speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've see this journey through.”

Will you let me be your servant?
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.

And while the congregation was singing this, the bride and groom washed each other's feet. – a wonderful way to exercise hospitality to one another and to celebrate their new relationship and commitment.

We don't often have the opportunity to literally wash someone's feet – but figuratively, how might we wash someone's feet? I'm reminded of a story a woman in St. Joseph told me. New neighbors of another nationality moved in. There were several children and the children began making a nuisance of themselves going door to door asking for cookies and asking to come and visit. This woman, I'll call her Delores could see the writing on the wall – neighbors began talking about calling social services. So Delores took it upon herself to go over to visit with the mother and learned that the mother felt kind of overwhelmed and her husband worked long days – so Delores continued to visit her regularly and literally began sharing with her some parenting skills. She got the neighbors to go together to build a sand box and swings and it made a big difference in the neighborhood. That I think is welcoming the stranger, definitely being hospitable.

Benedict did not come up with the idea of hospitality, rather we will find examples of hospitality in the Hebrew Scripture and in the teachings of Jesus.

Think of three visitors to Sarah & Abraham & in the book of Ruth; & Job opening his door to a stranger.

And in the New testament: think of the Gospel with Martha & Mary welcoming Jesus to their home, Jesus insisting on feeding the multitudes and the story of the Prodigal Son or the Prodigal Father. To mention just a few.

As was mentioned in the flyer introducing this “Lunch and Learn” the word hospitality doesn’t appear in our English translations of the Rule of Benedict. Benedict does however address issues around guests in 6 chapters of the Rule:

Ch 31 Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer

Ch 42 Silence after Compline

Ch 53 the Reception of Guests

Ch 56 the Abbot’s or the Prioresses Table

Ch 58 The Procedure for Receiving Brothers or Sisters

Ch 66 The Porter or Portress of the Monastery

- ✚ To the cellarer, Benedict says show every care and concern for guests.
- ✚ About silence after Compline, keep it strictly except when guests require attention.
- ✚ In chapter 53, all guests are to be welcomed as Christ, the superior and Sisters meet the guest with all the courtesy of love, pray with them, offer the kiss of peace, then the superior or Sister sit with them, read the divine law and after, every kindness is to be shown to the guest.
- ✚ The superior may break the fast with guests, pour water on the hands of guests, the entire community wash the feet of the guests, great care and concern to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims because in them Christ is received.
- ✚ A separate kitchen is provided and the superior is to eat with them.
- ✚ Adequate bedding for the guest quarters.
- ✚ When meeting a guest, ask for a blessing.
- ✚ New members stay in the guest quarters before being received.
- ✚ And finally to the Porter or the Portress of the Monastery as soon as anyone knocks or a poor man calls out, the reply is: “Thanks be to God” or “your blessing, please”, then with all gentleness provide a prompt answer with the warmth of love.

Jessica Wroblewski defines hospitality as “that willingness to extend unquestioning welcome to a stranger.” But as the title of her book suggests, *The Limits of Hospitality*, she soon realizes that there are other virtues and conditions that are necessary to sustain the practice of hospitality over time and in diverse circumstances, whether such places are the possessions of families and households, churches and communities of charity, educational institutions or nation states. She speaks of the 5 pairs of spiritual disciplines that are relevant to hospitality: They include:

Prayer of Word and Prayer of Silence: Prayer of Word may be expressions of thanksgiving, intention or intercession, whereas prayer of silence, or silent contemplation, a person doesn't necessarily do anything but rather seeks primarily to make herself available and attentive to God, with empty hands, vulnerable, useless, without much to show, prove or defend.

Solitude and Fellowship: The practice of true hospitality requires not only that we ourselves become "quiet cells where God can dwell" (Nouwen's idea) in our solitude but also that we learn to find Christ in every stranger and his Spirit in every gathering of strangers or friends.

Fasting and celebration: We ordinarily think of fasting involving abstinence from food and sometimes even drink, but we can also fast from a cell phone or a car or television or alcoholic beverages or a face book account, fasting from these can open time for hospitality. Not all hospitality is celebratory, but if I invite someone in with a smile or a sense of joy, this is the best side of hospitality. Humor, joy, laughing or smiling, decorations, food, drink of course not required but is a way to honor a guest or stranger.

Service and Rest: Service is probably the practice most obviously connected to hospitality. This usually is probably small insignificant things. (Dr. Mary Hinton, her first reunion weekend: servant leadership). The other side of service is that of rest, meaning not only taking a step back from our work, but also learning to be a graceful recipient of the service of others. We've sort of come to see "being busy" as synonymous with being important. But rest, Sabbath keeping, an afternoon tea can actually invigorate, energize and inspire further service.

Confession and Forgiveness: Hospitality requires us to admit mistakes, faults & failings and even simply to ask for advice of others, that is, seek the wisdom of others. Ongoing forgiveness is a necessary part of all significant and enduring relationships- families, friendships, professional colleagues and partners.

Wroblewski in her book *The Limits of Hospitality* also suggests that hospitality is not total openness – which would deny the integrity of the household and therefore the safety and significance of the welcome- but rather a balance between a generous openness and the safety of boundaries.

One image she finds helpful in thinking about the relationship between the limits and spirit of hospitality is that of an inflated latex balloon; without the balloon itself, which sets the limits, there is only undifferentiated air and yet without the air that is breathed into it, a balloon is merely a flat and lifeless piece of latex. Continuing that image she suggests that if the balloon is filled too rapidly it will pop. And yet what appears to be a tiny piece of latex has tremendous potential for expansion if it is gradually stretched and filled with spirit air. This does not mean it can expand infinitely. But it does mean that a

disciplined “stretching” can lead to the gradual expansion of human limits of and capacity for hospitality.

In Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations from The Desert Fathers and Mothers, he reminds us “Love lives and thrives in our heart space when we are praying for someone, we are holding them in our heart space. When a resentment, negativity or irritation comes into our mind, move that thought or person literally into our heart space. Dualistic commentaries are lodged in our head; but in our heart it is surrounded with blood, which will often feel warm like coals. In this space it is almost impossible to comment, judge, create story lines or remain antagonistic!

So what does it mean to be hospitable? I always think, the real meaning of hospitality has to do with what Jane Tomaine describes as: “making room inside ourselves for another person” from her book: *St. Benedict’s Toolbox*.

In conclusion, Hospitality is not so much a single virtue or action – but a way of life.

That’s it. Thank you for coming today!