

# Hospitality theology - Living by the Word – Column

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Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

Southern women are great Marthas and proud of it. Having been raised in this culture, I know that supper in a southern kitchen is a wonder to behold. Those who have traditional southern hospitality refined to an art never sit. They hover. Plates are never allowed to go empty. Guests are continually asked if they need anything. In fact, many times the hostess will continue to cook all through the meal.

When does the hostess eat? This is one of the South's mysteries. The hostess keeps working, huffing around the table, a trickle of perspiration running past the string of pearls on her neck. She misses all dinner conversation, all sharing of feelings and information, and gives herself totally to serving.

Also a wonder is the woman who greets the guests unflustered at the door with the table already set, the kitchen spotless. This hostess sits, talks, laughs and eats the appetizers with her guests. She excuses herself, goes to the kitchen, and returns with food that's prepared and ready to eat. At dinner, she remains around the table, getting to know the guests, asking about their lives, sharing her own thoughts and feelings.

Hospitality is an art form. Along its spectrum we all fall somewhere between Martha Stewart and the person who has the pizza place listed on the speed dial. We might shrug off the matter of hospitality styles as an unimportant detail of life except that there appears to be a theology of hospitality at work in scripture. Prime examples of this theology are found in the narratives of two dinner parties: one by the oaks of Mamre and the other in the village of Bethany. Abraham and Sarah spontaneously entertain strangers who appear suddenly during their afternoon nap. Mary and Martha entertain their friend Jesus. They know that he is known as a personality, and even talk sometimes about whether or not their friend could be the Messiah promised to God's people. He is a friend whose presence makes the hostess dust off the good china and polish the silver.

Theologically speaking, hospitality is vital. Not because of the food how much there is and what is served is inconsequential. A little unleavened bread and a cup of wine will do in most cases, because what truly brings us together is the word.

During the eating and the drinking al fresco at Mamre and around the table at Bethany, God's word is shared. The strangers (who the reader knows are God and angels) come to dinner to deliver a message: God promises Abraham and Sarah that the barren will rejoice. At dinner, Jesus shares the promises of God with Mary that the lowly will be lifted up, the dead will be raised, the blind will see and the hopeless given hope.

Theologically speaking, the purpose of hospitality is to prepare a welcoming space for encounters with God's word. It's not that God's word cannot be heard in barren, inhospitable places or circumstances. God is not so limited, but we are. God can speak in any situation, but we, frail creatures, cannot always hear. The Bible witnesses to the struggle of the Hebrews in the wilderness where they were so preoccupied with the lack of creature comforts that they constantly complained against God and Moses. To keep their attention, to keep them moving, to keep them faithful, God often found herself preparing dinners of manna and quail. Only then, when fed, could they hear the word. So it is with us.

Faith communities are rediscovering the theology of hospitality. As congregations change, many have been forced to reclaim this wisdom as old as Abraham. The image on the lips of evangelists (and successful evangelists, I might add) is one of the local congregation as a mission outpost instead of a family chapel. These congregations no longer lukewarmly welcome

visitors, but enthusiastically expect them. Instead of simply trying to fit them in, these congregations plan for the stranger.

If the theology of hospitality is to create a welcome environment where the word of God is more easily heard and understood, then we must always be attentive to what people need so that their eyes, ears, hearts and minds are open to the Spirit of God. Sometimes this is a hard sell to Christians who are resistant to the connections between welcome and word. They must address practical hospitality issues such as building accessibility, visitor-friendly bulletins, a fully staffed nursery, or parking. And these are theological hospitality issues. A congregation that traditionally sets the dinner table of the Eucharist only occasionally might, for hospitality reasons, institute the sharing of the meal at each service of the congregation. Along with having good historical, liturgical and theological reasons for doing so, a congregation should have hospitality concerns for the member who works every third Sunday and may not be present for "communion Sunday."

Gospel hospitality will not allow people to starve physically or spiritually. True welcoming is more interested in the needs of the guest than the preferences of the host. It's something to keep in mind when entertaining those angels unawares.