

Many of us recall, or many of us have been told, about the aftermath of September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of 9/11, for the first time in history, the entire North American airspace was closed. Planes were ordered to land before arrival to their original destination, with captains, crew, and passengers having no idea why this was happening. Many of these planes were from the United States, and their flights were diverted to towns and cities in Canada. In Gander, Newfoundland, a seldom used airport had thirty-eight planes land in a matter of hours. These thirty-eight planes carried around seven thousand passengers, nearly doubling the population of the island town in less than twenty four hours.

The town rose to the occasion, and radical hospitality ensued for the next five days until the airspace opened once more. The story of the people, both the locals and the “come from aways”, as nonnatives of the island are endearingly known, that unfolded has fascinated many. Countless articles have been run, television features done, and in recent years, the hit Broadway musical *Come From Away* have shared those five days in Gander with the whole world.

So, what is the radical hospitality story of post-9/11 Gander, Newfoundland? After a twenty-eight hour security based wait on planes, on the tarmac, the passengers were finally allowed off. Gander citizens, having been hard at work with preparations for those same twenty-eight hours, immediately jumped from plans and preparations to a continuous, unceasing hospitality. School buses were used to take the plane people to hotels, schools, neighboring towns, and other community buildings, where there were supplies waiting. Food was prepared, phones set out, TVs turned on, prescriptions filled by the Gander pharmacist, prayer rooms set aside, toiletries collected, donated clothes rounded up, all to provide for the needs of the plane

people. Although this material hospitality continued over the next five days, it became more than just meeting physical needs.

As the musical about this story, *Come From Away*, strikingly shares, those five days also became about relationship building, meeting emotional needs, and a mutual hospitality. One woman from Gander sat for days by the phone with a woman from Queens, New York, who was hoping to hear from her firefighter son. A plane passenger from the Middle East was the master chef for an international hotel chain, and ended up coordinating food in Gander at that time as well. Local grocery stores opened their doors, giving out their stock and supplies for no charge. Locals opened up their homes and hosted people from the planes. Another man planned and started a scholarship fund for the people of Gander. A Jewish citizen of Gander talks to a Jewish rabbi from the planes about his lineage for the first time in his life. As the story unfolds onstage, we see that the meeting of emotional and relational needs is more than the Newfoundland citizens providing for the plane people-- it takes giving and receiving on both sides. The sharing is mutual, the learning goes both ways.

It wasn't always easy, and the story can't be told as if all fourteen thousand people magically got along for five days. Wariness of passengers from African or Middle Eastern countries caused difficulties to those passengers, tensions for all, and even harsh verbal exchanges. Differences in religion caused tension as well. Perhaps what is striking about the musical, and the real life story, is the honest truth telling. Woven together are the beautiful stories of hospitality-- grace, love, and giving-- and the painful stories of the reality of that experience, and of sitting at the table-- or sleeping on a mat near-- someone different than oneself.

In our series so far, we have explored fasting, spiritual companionship, prayer, celebration, and studying Scripture. Today, of course, we are exploring hospitality together. The challenge today is to shift our way of thinking about hospitality from a one time, one way act to a discipline of mutual exchange, which can be practiced and inspire growth. The challenge is also to let go of the idea that hospitality can only come from a place of certainty-- for example, perhaps we are afraid that we can't be hospitable if we are in a place of questioning faith or if we are in a certain financial position. Hospitality can be extended from all places.

Quite a different context than modern Canada sets the scene for hospitality in our Biblical passage for today. Instead of cold, watery Newfoundland, we find ourselves in the dry, hazy Palestinian desert. Abraham is sitting in the shade near the entrance to his tents, taking a reprieve from the sun in the hottest part of the day. Suddenly, he notices three men approaching, and he rushes to abandon his rest and meet them, bowing low to the ground. He asks them to wait for him to prepare water for washing their feet, and to rest under the tree while he prepares a meal. Abraham tells them that he wants to do this for them so that they may be refreshed before they go on their way, specifically naming himself as their servant.

Abraham then turns to Sarah, his wife, telling her to quickly make bread out of the finest flour. He hurries to his cattle, selecting a calf which will result in the highest quality meat, and has a servant prepare it. Through all of this preparation, the original Hebrew words tell us how quickly this is all happening¹-- Abraham is running to and fro, ensuring this feast is pulled together well.

¹ Believers Church Bible Commentary

Finally, when it's prepared, Abraham adds curds and milk to the feast. As the three strangers eat this meal, Abraham stands near them, under a tree, the position of a servant.² The three strangers deliver news to Abraham: they intend on returning in a year, and when they do, Abraham and Sarah will have a son. This announcement makes more clear something that was mentioned earlier in the text. These strangers, somehow, are no ordinary humans, but the Lord. Yet Abraham had not known this, and extended this no holds barred hospitality to three strangers.

Not only does this passage model for us a radical hospitality towards strangers, it also demonstrates the mutual nature of hospitality. Abraham, who gives a meal to these three strangers, and acts as their servant, also ends up receiving from them when they share the news of his son. To be clear-- this is not encouragement for practicing hospitality for selfish means. Radical hospitality isn't a formula but a way of opening ourselves³, acknowledging that we are connected with those around us. It is inward, requiring us to prepare ourselves to meet others where they are at, and it is outward, requiring action. We are all capable of learning and teaching, providing for and being served, giving and receiving.

In Washington, D.C., just off of the ever busy 16th Street near Rock Creek Park, sits a large house with a banner of colorful peace flags. This is the International Guest House, a ministry of the Allegheny Mennonite Conference of Mennonite Church USA. Two hosts work with a team of volunteers to run this hostel/ bed and breakfast fusion, welcoming guests from all over the United States and even the world. Everyday, volunteers host a breakfast and evening tea time, leading the conversation. Navigating chatter of for many guests from diverse backgrounds,

² Believers Church Bible Commentary

³ Suella Gerber

with a wide set of reasons for being in the city, is not easy. It takes work, and it takes practice over time.

When the Practicing Faith series was introduced, and in preparing for it, we were encouraged to see spiritual practices as similar to physical health. In order to be spiritually healthy, we must work on these practices, similar to how healthcare, for example, leads to greater physical health.⁴ Practicing hospitality takes work. Not every invitation will be accepted, and maybe that makes extending one harder the next time. Not every interaction will be easy, and we may say the wrong thing on occasion. Giving takes courage, and receiving takes courage, but the rewards are great. Hearing people's stories, sharing yours, helping one another, sharing radical love-- it liberates.

In Abraham, we see an individual practicing hospitality, while in Gander, Newfoundland, we see an entire community practicing hospitality. This idea of individual or communal is similar to the three social work spheres of practice, known as micro, mezzo, and macro. Micro refers to practice with an individual, mezzo refers to practice with a community, and macro refers to practice with societies or systems. We can think about the spiritual discipline of hospitality in these terms too. Where are you called to show hospitality? To whom? What sphere of hospitality are you drawn towards working into your life? Perhaps, like Abraham, it's with individuals, such as newcomers at your workplace or school. Or, not so newcomers you may hope for the opportunity to know better. Possibly it's on a community level, such as volunteering at a nonprofit or social services center in Goshen, or here at church. Or perhaps you feel led to

⁴ <https://waterfordchurch.org/worship/>

work at a macro level. What can be done at a societal level to show hospitality to others? How can we-- how could you-- practice the radical hospitality of loving our neighbor?

Hospitality doesn't just show up in the Old Testament. Joel van Dyke, an employee of a global peacemaking leadership network called Street Psalms, wrote about the effect of hospitality in the well known story of Jesus and Zaccheus. Zaccheus, a tax collector, is looked down upon socially. He is small in body and spirit. He does want to see Jesus, however, and so he climbs into a tree to watch from above as Jesus comes closer. Many are familiar with this story, and we know what happens next. Jesus stops, looks up, calls Zaccheus by name, and tells Zaccheus that he will be staying at his house. Van Dyke points out that this hospitality shown by Jesus is "startling" and is framed with "scandalous grace."⁵ Immediately, the crowd grumbles about Jesus having dinner and staying with a sinner. As the author notes, hospitality is inclusivity, and that is a difficult pill to swallow for others set on exclusion. The crowd's reaction to the interaction between Jesus and Zaccheus illustrates barriers that prevent us from being hospitable. Here we see the barriers of social standing, class, distaste, and anger preventing others from practicing and receiving hospitality, but there are other perceived barriers-- political party, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, tradition, ignorance, other emotions. Hospitality is bravely reaching across socioeconomic, political, or other lines, extending and receiving generosity and grace.

Van Dyke writes, "Emboldened by the gift of having being seen, Zacchaeus comes out of hiding in haste and stands tall before Jesus. Inflamed with gratitude, he lives into the freedom that he has been invited to embrace."⁶ Jesus's hospitality, in this case, is seeing Zaccheus for who

⁵ <https://streetpsalms.org/hospitality-inverted/>

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he is, and engaging with him as a whole person, someone who has made poor decisions and has incredible potential for good ones. Hospitality invites Zaccheus to open himself to newness and growth, and he renounces his prior greedy behavior, professing the commitment to make monetary amends. The story of Zaccheus and Jesus shows us that when we're not sure who we are, or we're not sure who the Divine is, we may find some hints in hospitality: seeing others, being seen, giving, receiving.

Furthermore, Van Dyke points out the dynamics between marginalized and centralized identities in this story.⁷ Jesus inverts the marginalization in the society, embodied in the way he stands below Zaccheus and looks up. Jesus's hospitality, then, includes a symbolic laying down of privilege and centralization to grow in a mutual relationship with the person on the margins. To be hospitable, we must be open to individual, community, and societal inversions of power and privilege.

We may not find ourselves in the position of sheltering thousands of plane passengers here in Goshen, Indiana. And we probably won't find ourselves staring up into a tree at a government employee we don't like. But there are chances for showing all types of hospitality-- micro, mezzo, macro-- in our daily lives. We need each other's hospitality, and the world needs our hospitality, as we are all connected to one another.

The narratives of Abraham, Sarah, Jesus, and Zaccheus shows us that the God we learn about is a God of radical hospitality. God comes to us to be served, as in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Through Jesus, God sits out our tables and stays in our homes.⁸ When we choose the way of Jesus, no matter what uncertainties we bring with us; when we choose to exercise faith;

⁷ <https://streetpsalms.org/hospitality-inverted/>

⁸ With some help from Suella Gerber

we also choose to practice hospitality. Our challenges, then, are this: Work to be open to learning. Welcome others. Reach across the barrier. Meet others where they are at. Centralize the marginalized. Share stories. Our challenge, through it all, is to give and receive bravely.⁹

⁹ Thanks to Suella Gerber for her time, energy, and responses to initial drafts.