

Hospitality in Urban Ministry

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Years ago, I attended a benefit concert for Heartside Ministry held in its small chapel on South Division Avenue in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Located at that time in the Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids, the traditional living place for the homeless population of the city, the ministry was little more than a couple of offices, a chapel, a basement full of used clothing, and a soon-to-open free medical clinic. (Today it is a non-denominational church that provides a place for worship and for services to the homeless population.) In the middle of the concert, a disturbance at the door turned the heads of those of us sitting nearby. In came Billy, supported by two friends and drinking buddies, bleeding from the head, dirty, full of the stench of cheap alcohol and an unwashed body, and barely able to stand. A handful of people got up to assist Billy, call an ambulance, and find a place for him to sit. During the wait for emergency personnel, one of the concert-goers asked the two friends what had made them come there. They replied, "People say you can come in here and get help and not be judged." This is perhaps the best definition of hospitality in an urban ministry setting.

In biblical terms, we typically think of hospitality as the offer of a place of rest, food, shelter, and asylum, the idea being that we offer this gift to strangers "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb.13:2). On another level, a host must offer hospitality because he or she might one day also be a stranger in need of sanctuary. Hospitality is a biblical imperative. At its best, it is the offer of sacred space, holy ground to the stranger in our midst. Our example is God, who lavishes nourishing care on creation and all of its creatures without regard for human valuation. Hospitality delights in and is defined by welcoming the other as a gift. Dorothy Day, tireless advocate for the Catholic Workers movement, maintained that the person we are welcoming *is* Christ, is not merely like him. For Christians, hospitality does not merely tell what we do but defines who we are. It is an intrinsic value, not an extracurricular activity.

How this model is lived in an urban, homeless neighborhood is the challenge. Though Jesus acknowledged in three of the Gospels, "you always have the poor with you," he did not endorse the idea. Poverty might be the reality of social and economic structures, but it was not part of the divine vision. Yet neighborhoods populated by homeless people are a fixture of every major city in the United States. These are the neighborhoods where people driving through roll up their windows and lock their doors, where the curious sometimes venture through to "look at the poor people," the dregs of our society. Urban ministry in these settings is all about giving help and not judging, and offering sacred space to strangers without regard for their condition.

The “strangers” ministries like these welcome are those living in rescue missions; addicts and those who sell to them; the mentally ill; women, often with children, fleeing domestic violence; those with a history of criminal sexual conduct; the recently released from prison; prostituted women, men, girls, and boys, and the pimps who put them on the streets; the chronically alcoholic; the emotionally impaired; and those who *were* one paycheck away from homelessness. Too often, these are the lepers of twenty-first century America. Many in these urban congregations have been in jail or prison, many more have struggled with substance abuse, others live on the fringe, just one scam away from their next bout with law enforcement. Several years ago, new on staff at Heartside Ministry, I requested the Kent County Jail to be allowed to visit as a pastor. The designation meant I could visit any time and would not count toward the number of visits a prisoner was restricted to each week. At that time, the jail allowed only one clergy person per parish. I recall trying to explain the importance of jail visits for our parishioners and the need for an additional pastor from Heartside. I just was not getting through to the person at the other end of the phone. Finally, in exasperation, she asked, “Well, how many people at one time from your church might be in the jail?” I replied, “It’s possible that half the congregation might be incarcerated at once!” The point was that jail did not preclude the extension of hospitality to anyone.

Some of the strangers who come through these inner-city doors are easy to love. Their stories are heartbreaking sagas of grinding poverty, childhood abuse, sexual misuse, poor parenting, and very little love. Some are like Shirley, who arrived one Sunday morning having spent the night in the hospital getting put back together, the victim of a savage beating at the hands of her boyfriend of seven years. Released in the wee hours of the morning, she then took all the pills they gave her for the pain, intending to end her life. When she walked through the doors she was looking for a place to vomit, having suddenly decided her life was worth living after all. Shirley later told of being prostituted by her mother from the age of nine to feed her drug habit, of “working” for her boyfriend to feed his, of losing her children because of homelessness and her own addiction. For some time after that Sunday, Shirley stayed in a women’s shelter, attended two domestic violence groups and regular AA meetings, enrolled in computer classes, and attended church. She was a victim who cried out for help and was receiving it. Five weeks later, Shirley is still a victim in need of help but asking that she not be judged for returning to her abusive relationship.

Others are more difficult still. From the severely mentally ill to the violent offender to those who are prone to disruptive behavior, hospitality extends to them all. Some are like Tim, who is a young man with a nightmarish abuse history, a pattern of mental illness, and a catalogue of nuisance behaviors and

even assault. Most recently he lost his housing for pulling the fire alarm fourteen times for no reason other than to get attention. His inappropriate language and comments to women, his vicious remarks concerning gays and lesbians, as well as his sometimes violent behavior frequently result in his being barred from the very agencies that are there to assist him. His recent attack on a neighbor resulted in his being banned from our space until certain conditions were met; yet even Tim is not beyond our call to provide hospitality. We meet with him off site in an attempt to let him know that he is not beyond God's grace and love and to pave the way for him to seek restoration to the community that he disparages one minute and craves the next.

Hospitality in this urban setting is based on biblical principles of restorative justice. If someone breaks the peace in the community, he or she must work to restore that peace in order to be welcomed back into the community. This can be done through apology, sitting with those "victimized" by the behavior and making restitution, attending counseling to ensure the behavior is not repeated, or a host of other actions. At its heart, restorative justice is hospitality. It requires addressing victims' harms and needs and holding offenders accountable to put those harms right; it is not about judging. The process involves victims, offenders, and the larger community, but it begins within each of us. In her article, "Restorative Justice in Ourselves," Kathleen Denison writes that many people are locked in an inner prison that keeps them feeling ashamed, unlovable, unworthy, and rejected by God. The guiding principle of this inner prison system is security, keeping those "undesirable" parts of us locked away so that no one on the outside can ever see how unlovable, unworthy, and rejected by God we truly are. Keeping ourselves imprisoned protects us from further hurt but keeps us locked in shame, guilt, and a sense of rejection. Restorative justice inside ourselves means we listen and even honor our own stories of inner hurt so that we can become vessels into which God's love can pour. It is this kind of inner restoration, of being hospitable toward one's self, that workers in urban ministry must encourage.

Hospitality means the urban mission church provides a place and an atmosphere where such healing can take place both within us and in others. It is a safe place, a sanctuary, a place of acceptance and not judgment. Nowhere is this more evident than when someone in an area served by the mission church dies. Sometimes they are dear friends and among the faithful who gather each Sunday for worship. More often, the church becomes a place of grace for the family, friends, and neighbors of one who many thought was outside the bounds of faith. Many of those who live in homeless neighborhoods have spent much of their lives, certainly the more recent years, beyond the bounds of "church." Though some of the deaths that occur in these poverty-stricken neighborhoods are "ordinary" (cancer, diabetes, old age, heart disease), many are not. There are

those who freeze to death on a cold winter night, some who die of acute alcohol poisoning or an overdose, sometimes a suicide or a death by shooting, stabbing, or some other violent means. At those times we try to connect with the family through the networking of all the agencies in the neighborhood, piecing together the fragments of a life few in the family knew anything about. We then host a memorial service for neighbors, agency people, and family of the deceased. This is a time for gathering to sing, read Scripture, pray, and share our memories. Some of the memories are funny, some sad or even pathetic, but always they are honored and respected as part of one person's journey, one person, broken but still loved by God.

There was Bob, who arrived in the neighborhood a year ago. Bob had just left prison and could not find housing because of the nature of his criminal record, nor could he find employment, though he had extensive computer skills. Instead, Bob lived at the mission and spent every waking hour working in our computer center, assisting other adults. On Sundays he came to worship, though I suspect sometimes it was only so he could spend some time on the computer first. Bob died suddenly in late October, and his memorial service was full of extended family members and neighbors. Of the two, the neighbors knew him best. Bob was a person who helped them learn a valuable skill, never making them feel stupid or inadequate. They provided a place where his past was behind him and his gifts were appreciated. The family struggled with whether or not Bob knew Jesus. They fretted over his past and what had caused him to do the things he did; they questioned his future and worried about the hereafter. As we moved through the memorial service, the question of whether Bob knew Jesus was answered by the assurance that Jesus knew Bob. He felt it, through the hospitality of a place where he felt loved, forgiven, and appreciated.

The story of Geraldine haunts many in the Heartside Neighborhood. She was only nineteen and had a history of drug abuse and prostitution. A frequent visitor to the ministry, she was always worried about everyone else. Where was Joe going to sleep tonight if he was barred from the mission? Would Keith stop drinking before it killed him? Why did Henry, who craved love, act so belligerently, driving people away? In her own way, she was an advocate for the homeless even as we queried her—What about rehab? What about a program for prostituted women? Would she consider counseling? Then, one day in March, her body was found in a wooded area, stabbed more than twenty times, brutalized by some unknown assailant. Her memorial service was packed with people who loved her, whose lives she had touched. And who could forget the detective on her case sobbing in the back as he listened to stories of someone who was a natural for a helping profession.

Hospitality in this urban setting is frequently rooted in acts of mercy. Jesus defined hospitality in Matthew 25:35-36, saying, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." But biblical hospitality in this setting moves beyond said acts of mercy into acts of justice. It is not enough to help with food, clothing, shelter, and spiritual needs. Addressing the ills of a society and its systems that perpetuate poverty and homelessness is also necessary for true hospitality. Individuals can do acts of mercy; but they can also withhold them or pick who their recipients are. If we work to change unjust systems we are ultimately making many acts of charity unnecessary. For example, we can collect winter coats, work on a food drive, and distribute Thanksgiving baskets to the poor and needy. But hospitality needs to also extend to writing letters to public officials and business owners urging them to become advocates for a living wage so there are no "working poor," advocating for more mental health monies and more extensive programs to care for this fragile population, demanding more in-patient rehab beds and longer stays for a population that is increasingly addicted.

One of our society's biggest pariahs serves as a useful illustration. In the United States, few are more despised than sexual offenders. Often violated themselves, these are the people who prey on children, vulnerable women, young men. To protect others, our states keep lists and make them available to the public to keep known offenders away from potential victims. Because they have difficulty getting employment and housing, those with criminal sexual conduct convictions are a large population in homeless and poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Because of their records, they are not eligible for any public housing. In a city like Grand Rapids, this means they cannot live in any of the low-income properties available to others, even those that do not allow children. This is also true of those with felony convictions for violent or drug-related offenses. Often, people first react to these facts with a feeling of justification, because of the heinousness of the sexual offenders' crimes. But as Christians we are challenged to seek and save the lost. We do not claim that those with sex offenses, or violent or drug-related records, are to be thrown away as people. Nor do we declare "these people" beyond God's saving grace. Despite our horror of their crimes, few Christians would say that they do not deserve a place to live. Yet our actions declare just that. It would be far more merciful to incarcerate them for life than to treat them as subhuman and deny them housing. Hospitality demands that we embrace even these, welcoming them as the stranger and the estranged in our midst.

If hospitality in an urban ministry setting is about providing help and advocacy, it is also about providing an opportunity for worship that is inviting and grace

filled. Worship must be hospitable. Too often those who enter blighted urban neighborhoods in the name of religion do so with the idea of saving people from their sins, frequently beginning by telling their congregants how truly sinful and lost they are. This approach frequently serves to reinforce feelings of failure, inadequacy, and uselessness. Beyond that, it is inhospitable. Nowhere else would we dare to enter someone's space and begin to tell them how bad they are and what they ought to change. This method does not respect people as persons nor does it do much to help them address the issues that have brought them to such neighborhoods. How much more does our God call us to build up, to preach loving each other *as ourselves*? In urban ministry, hospitality means greeting each person as a child of God, born with gifts and loved by the Creator. When entering their space, their neighborhood, it is about accepting hospitality from them first and then offering a sacred space where people can learn to value themselves as well as others around them. Worship then must focus on a celebration of God's love for us, God's involvement in our lives. It must center on our value to God, not our uselessness to society. Lay participation in the service, lay involvement with the Scriptures and in the sermon, empowers people to embrace a God who will never abuse, misuse, or abandon us. At Heartside Ministry, lay people called servant leaders (elders) set up the chapel each week, greet people as they arrive, read Scripture, serve Communion, sometimes provide music, and react to the opening up of Scripture by the pastor. Sermons are dialogical, an opportunity to interact with each other and with the message as together we discuss what the text is saying to each of us. It is a time of empowerment and excitement where we are all strangers, all welcomed by God and invited onto holy ground to be loved and treasured by the One who loves and treasures us all. Worship becomes hospitality at its best, and, beyond that, hospitality becomes worship at its most celebrative.