

Searching for the Innkeeper

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I had a wonderful thing happen to me this week. A church member, who gave me permission to tell this story on condition of anonymity, emailed me to tell me she really liked my newsletter article on hospitality in this month's Quest. In fact she was so inspired that she shared with me a story from her past. It's the first time that one of my newsletter articles has reeled in a sermon illustration! Feel free to keep sending me these gems.

Let's call the church member Mary. As a young adult Mary decided to visit a Presbyterian church that was relatively close to where she lived. She had a pretty good first impression of this church. The minister was warm and personable. She liked his sermon. The church building was attractive and well kept. The people at coffee hour afterwards were very welcoming. They were sincerely glad to have met her and asked her to return. Mary was all set to make this church her spiritual home. That is until she had one last encounter just before she left. An older woman, who was probably one of the matriarchs of the

church, came up to her and said, “If you do return to this church, don’t sit in my spot in the pew!” Needless to say, perhaps, that comment is the reason why Mary now attends this church.

This is to ministers the stuff of horror stories. I work very closely with our Membership Coordinator Susan Madison and many other fantastic volunteers on the Membership Teams, the Ushers, the Greeters, the folks in CYRE all coming together to make sure we are friendly and welcoming to everyone. Make no mistake, radical hospitality is a spiritual practice and it is a lot of work. But one bone-headed comment like what that matriarch said, can send the whole thing tumbling down like a sandcastle—carefully constructed and easily demolished by insensitive people.

I thought a lot about Mary’s story and how it contrasts with the story Lonni Collins Pratt shares in our Modern Reading today. Father Lawrence saw that this young girl was awed by the mystery and wonder of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Of course back then women, and particularly girls I suppose, would not be allowed behind the sacristy much less handle the vessel that carried the wine for the Eucharist. Roman Catholicism as an institution has never been accused of being a hotbed of feminist thought, especially back then. Which in that context makes Father Lawrence’s gesture of hospitality—well radical. Unlike the matriarch in the Presbyterian church, Father Lawrence goes out of his way, even breaks the rules, to accommodate the young Lonni and her

hunger for mystery. She gets more than she imagined she would. That is true hospitality.

Of course at Christmas time hospitality becomes a major spiritual practice. This is embedded in the story itself. Mary and Joseph return to his home town for the Roman census while she is about ready to give birth. The local hotel has a no vacancy sign up. In some versions of this story, usually acted out in nativity plays in church Sunday schools, the innkeeper is an actual player in the story, although he makes no actual appearance in the scriptures. The innkeeper is portrayed as this uncaring or in some versions greedy, person who is out to make an extra buck by taking advantage of Joseph's obvious desperation by renting out the stables. Depending on one's view of scripture this is either creative license, Midrash—the Jewish literature of telling the story behind the story, or unscriptural heresy. Whatever it is, it creates a speaking part for a kid in a nativity play—something may a DRE has desperately sought when directing such things.

Yet the innkeeper does not actually appear in Luke's telling of the story. I am sure the biblical scholars out there would remind me that there are in fact two versions of the Christmas story in the Bible; one told in Luke and one told in Matthew. Luke talks about the inn, the angels, and the sheppards. Matthew talks about the star, the gifts, and the wise men. No one gospel account unites all of them together—that is the creation, again of innovative DREs who have merged the two

gospels together. In fact Matthew is no help to us here. Not only is there no innkeeper to be found, there is no inn or manger. According to Matthew 2 verse 11, the wise men “enter the house and kneel down” in front of the baby. Joseph and Mary haven’t even left their home in Matthew’s version of the story. In fact, they are the hosts to the wise men, and not the guests at the stable!

Funny how often we act out these two versions of the story in our modern practice of the Christmas holiday. We are either the hosts to traveling relatives who come to visit us, or we are the guests in someone else’s home. Whichever one you are this holiday season, I charge you to practice radical hospitality. Remember the example of Father Lawrence, who goes out of his way and gives Lonni Pratt more than she anticipated. Remember also the counter example of the matriarch in the Presbyterian church, whose selfish sense of entitlement to her “spot” in the pew helped to push away a young enthusiastic woman who would have energized that congregation. Entitlement is the enemy of hospitality.

Let’s start with the hosts, since they are the easiest to understand in the context of hospitality. I relate to this because for the past few years my in laws, my mother, father and sister in law, have visited us during Christmas. This is a good thing—I very much like my in-laws, and for the record they have been welcomed here very warmly when they have visited this church. So much so that these very Catholic people, my

mother-in-law is a former nun and my sister-in-law is a Catholic chaplain in a hospital in Ohio, they love our 4 PM service.

But it is still exhausting playing host and hostess. It is nothing personal to them; it is mostly self-imposed. I want them to have a good holiday. They live in Florida, and have had to endure some unusually bitter Delaware winters the last two years. I want the food to be just right. I want to plan the activities as if I were some kind of holiday cruise director. The fact is that the main thing they want is to spend Christmas with their grandchildren whom they do not see as often as we would all like. They are fine with a low key affair.

This brings us to the dilemma many hosts face. Do you schedule every minute of the holiday party or do you just let it go and hope that your guests find what they need? We want to be a Father Lawrence-type who gives folks all that they wanted and hopefully a bit more that they didn't expect. But that can be tremendous pressure. The expectation that we place on ourselves is very high around the holidays. This can be especially true if your kids are a certain age and that sense of entitlement has crept in around what Christmas can and should be. That is a lot of pressure.

I like to call this Norman Rockwell Syndrome. It is an anxiety disorder brought about in holiday hosts who feel the need to compare real life to some idealized version of Christmas perfection that can never

be attained. I believe it is Norman Rockwell Syndrome that brought about a kind of collective glee in our culture at the downfall of Martha Stewart. I remember being surprised at how many people really hated Martha Stewart and were kind of glad to see her get her just deserts. This perplexed me at the time, but I have come to see that Martha Stewart was a symbol. She became a kind of scapegoat for going the extra mile, in a persnickety, absurd way, of having everything just so. She represented perfection and all of us fall short of perfection. Thus seeing her fall short of it too, frankly brought out the worst in some people.

I don't think that radical hospitality means you have to be Martha Stewart or even try. Norman Rockwell Syndrome, the anxiety to strive toward unattainable perfection and to judge oneself harshly when you fail, is a pathology of hospitality. There is a healthy balance to strike. Note that Father Lawrence may have broken the rules by allowing a child to roam around in parts of the church that were officially forbidden, but it wasn't like he had to prepare a million details in order to accommodate her. It was well within his abilities and power to grant her wish. Matthew doesn't tell us if Mary prepared a big spread for the wise men when they showed up at her house. Presumably she had the gold to do so after they arrived! I am sure Martha Stewart would have had the top six things to have in your freezer to pull out and whip up in 47 easy steps when unexpected Magi show up at your house. No the

Bible says nothing about this and so we have to use our imagination, as we have to so often.

The modern day champions of hospitality, the innkeepers at their best, are all around us. The next time you go to a restaurant watch how the waiters and waitresses talk to people, their body language, their eye contact. Of course there are some waitstaff who are terrible, and they are the stuff of legends and stories we tell our friends. But I believe those to be the exceptions—hence the reason we tell stories to each other about bad service. Watch how they are most of the time. I was in a restaurant about six months ago and my waitress was a tall attractive young woman. Her response to everything I said was “It would be my pleasure” and she would give a big toothy smile. I have remembered her so many months hence because she practiced radical hospitality—warm gestures and words followed by good service. Granted she did not go to absurd extremes to get me my ice tea, she did her job as well as any of her colleagues. But she gave me something more than I expected. She made it seem as if she really did derive personal pleasure from taking my order. That is radical hospitality: simple but not elaborate actions done in a friendly and compassionate spirit.

Of course there is Luke’s version of the story too, in which Mary and Joseph are the guests, or the potential guests, at the inn. This is the model to follow if you are going to be a guest this holiday season. Mary and Joseph show up hoping for a room. The innkeeper, and we have to

use our imagination here again, is booked up. Now we don't know if he felt sorry for the couple, seeing how she was about to give birth and let them stay in the only shelter he had left—the barn or stable. Or if he was a Scrooge out to take advantage of desperate people and charged them the full rate to stay in some makeshift shanty town he had constructed in the backyard. I guess which story you tell reveals your personal take on the inherent worth and dignity of all innkeepers or their inherent sinfulness. You be the judge.

What Luke does tell us, or at least implies, is how Mary and Joseph were as guests. They went with the flow. What no rooms? Sure we will take the stable. Just set aside a manger, make room for the little drummer boy, and keep a look out for some sheppards and we will be all set. There wasn't much available to them, they made the best of it, and it was fine. What they did not do was have a sense of entitlement. We are about to give birth—we expect the messiah suite! You didn't hear that from them. Entitlement is the opposite of hospitality and contrary to the values, teachings and hopefully practices of Unitarian Universalism.

That is the best and hardest advice during the holiday season: go with the flow. Just let it be what it is. Somehow in the middle of summer, when you were at the beach sipping a beverage taking in the sun and sand, “go with the flow” made all the sense in the world. Here it is six months later and regardless of whether you are a host or a guest this year, “go with the flow” seems next to impossible. One wonders if

it is the chill in the air or the increasing darkness of the skies that brings about a comparable darkness in us. I hope not. Because going with the flow is the attitude we need to take now more than ever.

Last summer hurricane Irene created some water damage in the lower level of our house. We have replaced the furniture in our living room, but have been waiting on some contractors to replace the floor in our living room and guest bedroom, where our guests from Florida, bearing gifts for small children this Christmas, will be staying in a few short weeks. Thus we had a certain amount of anxiety and urgency to get this job done, if not all the way at least to a respectable degree.

Last week the guy from the flooring store called to say that he had the flooring material in stock but had us on the schedule for delivery after the holidays. The tone in my wife's voice as she told me what these guys said is one I am all too familiar with. I hear it when I have majorly messed something up, and I begin to consider what the staff might think if I spent the night in my office. I heard that tone in Sharon's voice and I knew that the fellow on the other end of the line heard it too. The guys delivered our floor yesterday, and will be installing it on Tuesday. Don't mess with a stressed out innkeeper!

So yes, go with the flow is much easier said than done. But it is good advice to get through the holidays regardless of whether you are the host or the guest. If the Magi show up and the house isn't exactly

the way you want it—don't worry. If you get to the inn and the innkeeper is nowhere to be found, or has jacked up the prices on a room that would make a stable and a manger seem like the Bilagio—just go with the flow. Remember that the punch line to both Matthew and Luke's story is the same: in the midst of incredible and fantastic conditions God is found in very humble moments. As Unitarian Universalists we can take that as literally or as metaphorically as you wish. I think it is a good message. Christmas is found in the humble moments not the grand elaborate plans and conventions.

May we find an innkeeper whose hospitality offers us all that we could imagine and more in those humble moments. Amen Blessed Be.