

Strangers... Messengers of God!

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There are few, if any, congregations in the Uniting Church that do not think about themselves as hospitable congregations. All of us like a yarn, a cuppa and the fellowship we have with our fellow believers. And that has been true of all the congregations where I have served as minister: they all took pride in the fact that they were a hospitable community.

And that is both important as well as wonderful. Hospitality is much more important in the bible than most people would be aware of. It plays a central role in the Old Testament and in Jesus' preaching truly was one of the touchstones of the Kingdom of God.

However, particularly telling and revealing was when I asked newcomers or visitors to these congregations: how do you experience the congregation – as distant or hospitable? The answers varied but it would be true to say that many newcomers experienced it in an entirely different way than the parishioners did.

This really intrigued me. Why was there such a gaping divide between the way those on the inside viewed the presence of hospitality in their communities – their own or what they experienced from others - compared to those on the outside?

It would be true to say that it was only when I understood what the bible meant by hospitality that I began to understand the reason for the discrepancy between the two groups. So let us take a closer look at hospitality in the bible.

The Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament is philoxenia. Literally it means: "love for the stranger." The opposite of hospitality is something we know very well in modern society: xenophobia – fear (or even hate) of the stranger.

In the Old Testament Israel is reminded to show hospitality to the strangers, because they have been strangers in Egypt. Therefore the stranger, or the ger as he or she is known in Hebrew, takes a special place in the bible. In the face of the stranger Israel saw themselves, in slavery, in bondage, dependent on the mercy of others.

In ancient Semitic society – as it is still the case in much of the Arabic world – hospitality was regarded as one of the cornerstones of a just society. Hence there are many, many examples of this hospitality in the bible. The problem, however, is, we don't recognize it, for almost all of us have grown up reading the bible with moralistic eyes and are often blind to the theology of the bible.

A good example of this, is the way the church has read and how many people still read Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction.

When the bible refers to the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah we hear it with moralistic ears, therefore people think that the depravity is of a sexual nature: in this case, homosexuality.

However, it is clear that Sodom and Gomorrah's depravity, their sin, was not homosexuality, but a lack of hospitality.

This is of course, fairly easy to prove, since Jesus Himself referred to Sodom and Gomorrah's grave depravity in Matthew 10 when He sent his disciples out and then with regard to the people and the towns which fail to show them hospitality in receiving them, Jesus said: "If anyone will not welcome you, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town." So clearly Jesus was not thinking of Sodom's in as something sexual, but as their refusal to offer hospitality.

In other words, hospitality is about much more than receiving a few friends around your table for dinner. It is much more than welcoming everyone with a handshake at church. It is much more than a yarn or a cuppa.

At the heart of biblical hospitality is the love for others, but not in the first place, love for others in their sameness of us, but exactly in their otherness of us. In Jesus' context, it meant inviting the crippled, the lame, the blind and the poor to your dinner table – and not only the friends, relatives and rich neighbours.

In our own context learning what this means, does not necessarily begin by inviting strangers into our houses. For us it begins by learning, not only to tolerate the differences between us, but truly appreciating the differences between us. With 'us' I mean, we who are together on any Sunday, we who have already much in common, we who can even call ourselves friends of one another.

Friendship begins with recognizing and appreciating the same traits, the same interests and the same views of life in others. Hospitality begins with recognizing and appreciating the different interests and the different worldviews of others.

In most congregations we welcome people with the hope of making them one of us or perhaps making them like us. We don't even realise that we do it, but they do.

Hospitality is an openness, a welcoming and a receptiveness of others because of their otherness.



Strangers are the others; that is; not only the people looking different from us, speaking a different language, but also those among us, those that do not conform to our norms or choose a significantly different lifestyle than what we have chosen. They often are the outsiders, the outcasts, the marginalized and the fringe dwellers.

I reckon the author of Hebrews puts this better than anyone else when he says: "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!"

In other words, we do not simply welcome others because they may be more interesting than we thought and we don't show others hospitality simply because that is part of our culture – we welcome others because we have been welcomed by God; we show others hospitality because God has shown us hospitality.

In and through Jesus Christ we know that God has taken our otherness to God's heart. In and through Jesus Christ we know that God who is the Totally Other, has fully received and welcomed us in God's life.

Some of you might have seen the film "The day after tomorrow" about fifteen years ago. It dealt with the possibility of the rapid dawn of a new ice age. Towards the end of the movie there is a scene of extreme irony. When the cold weather settles on the northern hemisphere, Americans are forced to flee south, to Mexico. One of the film's most striking images is the sight of Americans wading across the Rio Grande, trying to enter into Mexico illegally.

In his address, which is broadcasted from Mexico, the American president thanked the government of Mexico for allowing millions of his fellow citizens into the country when they needed their hospitality, and confessing that they did not do the same when the economic circumstances in their neighbouring country forced their citizens to flee north.

This brings us to perhaps the final and most important aspect of hospitality: that of reciprocity. Note the way Jesus concludes the parable about hospitality in Luke 14: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..."

I think these last words are the key to understanding the person of the other. He or she is the one who cannot repay us, who cannot offer us anything, that is anything but their otherness, their difference, their strangeness. This does not mean that they are necessarily from a different culture or a migrant. Quite often they live next door to us. We meet them on the streets, in the church, even within our own household. But how are they a blessing to us?

According to Jesus they are a blessing to us because they cannot repay us in the currency we value. Their blessing lies in who they are and what they symbolize to us, what they teach us.

Therefore, they are the ones we should value. Why? Because, according to the bible they have more to offer us than we have to offer them. For they remind us of the Totally Other. It is in their eyes that we see ourselves before God. It is in the mirror of their need to be embraced by us that we see ourselves and our need to be embraced by God.

And finally, the strangers among us also remind us of who we are: a pilgrim nation, strangers in a culture of self-service and self-interest. No wonder the author of Hebrews calls them angels: they truly are messengers of God.