

October 6, 2013 Radical Hospitality

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

Listen with the ear of your heart.

– Rule of Benedict

Sermon *Radical Hospitality*

(c) Rev. Sylvia Stocker

Reading from *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*ⁱ

The words of Father Theophane:

I knew there were many interesting sights, but I didn't want any more of the LITTLE answers. I wanted the big answer. So I asked the guestmaster to show me the House of the Christian God. I sat myself down, quite willing to wait for the big answer. I remained silent all day, far into the night. I looked Him in the eye. I guess He was looking me in the eye.

Late, late at night I seemed to hear a voice, "What are you leaving out?" I looked around. I heard it again. "What are you leaving out?" Was it my imagination?

Soon it was all around me, whispering, roaring, "What are you leaving out? WHAT ARE YOU LEAVING OUT?"

Was I cracking up? I managed to get to my feet and head for the door. I guess I wanted the comfort of a human face or a human voice. Nearby was the corridor where some of the monks live. I knocked on one cell.

“What do you want?” came a sleepy voice.

“What am I leaving out?”

“Me,” he answered.

I went to the next door.

“What do you want?”

“What am I leaving out?”

“Me.”

A third cell, a fourth, all the same. I thought to myself, “They're all stuck on themselves.” I left the building in disgust.

Just then the sun was coming up. I had never spoken to the sun before, but I heard myself pleading, “What am I leaving out?”

The sun too answered, “Me.”

That finished me. I threw myself down flat on the ground. Then the earth said, “ME,” too.

This year the Council has a new idea: to devote a period of time during the year to one “arm” of the Mission Statement. Our Mission Statement, as you may recall, is “to be a spiritual community, to welcome all, to nurture one another, to work for justice, and to care for the earth.” The Council will devote different blocks of time to planning programs focused on the last four elements of the Mission Statement (to welcome all, to nurture one another, to work for justice, and to care for the earth). This sermon, and next week's, take up what it means to “welcome all.”

But what about being a spiritual community, you may ask? Let me spend a few moments talking about that first. Here's the thinking: That first part of the Mission Statement is different from every other part of the Mission Statement, because it is a state of “being” as opposed to a state of “doing.” If our mission is *to be* a spiritual community, then spirituality needs to undergird everything we do.

Spirituality is a foundation for welcoming all.

Spirituality is a foundation for nurturing one another.

Spirituality is a foundation of working for justice.

Spirituality is a foundation of caring for the earth.

We *are* a spiritual community. That's the basis for everything we do. So we will, *ipso facto*, be doing spiritual work on each element of the Mission Statement.

Still, let's briefly address our mission to be a spiritual community. Specifically, let's start with the word “spiritual,” as I know the word can be difficult for some.

In the last couple of weeks, in two different settings, two of my colleagues have reminded their listeners about the root of the word “spirit.” In Latin, the root is

“*spiritu*.” In Hebrew, “*ruah*.” Both “*spiritu*” and “*ruah*” mean not just “spirit,” but also “breath.” Thus, in those two ancient languages, to have “spirit” means to have “breath.” To be “spiritual” means – at its most basic level – literally, “to breathe.”

That may seem an odd way to define “spiritual” at first. But, think for a minute, about the difference between life and death – about the living body and the dead one. Some of us have been present at the exact moment when someone – a person or a pet – died. No words fully describe that last expiration of air leaving the lungs and dispersing into the world, leaving the shell that once held a living soul. We cannot fully comprehend it, but that body, which moments ago was breathing, is fundamentally different from the one that now lies still.

Spiritu/breath/spirit is gone. *Ruah*/breath/spirit is gone.

As long as we breathe, we have spirit, we are spiritual. When we cease to breath, spirit leaves; we are no longer spiritual. That's the most basic meaning of “spiritual” to me. As a spiritual community we breathe together.

But of course that is not all. The deeper meaning is to ponder the questions that come with being an en-spirited being. What draws the air into my lungs unbidden? I don't mean simple biology or physiology. I mean, why does my breathing happen at all? What manner of creation created me? Gave me breath? Gave me spirit? Where does my spirit go when my breath leaves me for the final time? What is the purpose of my life in between the first and last breath?

Those unanswerable questions, the awe they engender, the sense of enfolding mystery, the wonderment that I have been given life, that all of us have been given

life, the searching for the best ways to live out my life, our lives – those are the building blocks of the spiritual community we create together. We are living, breathing, spiritual beings, sharing our curiosity, commitment, time, wonder, and even devotion.

Just for a few moments I invite you to close your eyes – or adopt a soft, unfocused gaze if that is more comfortable to you. Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus your attention as fully as you can on each breath, in and out.

Each breath comes, simply comes, whether you will it to or not, whether you struggle for it or not, a gift of life and spirit.

Cultivate a sense of wonder and gratitude for each breath.

Imagine, as your breath leaves your body, it is physically transformed from your lungs' process. A tiny part of you, at the most molecular level, breathes itself into the world.

Breathe in;

you literally breathe in infinitesimal parts of those around you... the people around you, and all other life forms around you. You are the people you sit with today, the baby in Mongolia nursing at his mother's breast. You are the hungry, the overly fed, the rich, the poor, the lonely, the contented. You are the bear getting ready to hibernate and the geese flying south. You are the African lion and the arctic polar bear.

You are life itself.

Breathe out; you share yourself with all of life.

Each breath a miracle and mystery. Each breath a new strand of connection to our world.

Focus on a few more breaths. When you are ready, open your eyes.

We are a living, breathing, spiritual community.

What does it mean for this living, breathing, spiritual community to “welcome all”? If all of life flows in and out of us as we breathe our way through our days and years, how do we open our arms with intention and grace to the people who come through our doors?

A little more than year ago, our Membership Committee created their own mission statement to guide their work:

“Our mission is to create the friendliest, warmest, most welcoming congregation in Mid-coast Maine, where soul meets soul.”

How are they doing with that?

How are we doing with that?

How are you doing with that?

Creating a welcoming congregation isn't always easy. And it's not the work of the Membership Committee alone. The work belongs to all of us. The spiritual practice of radical hospitality is pretty hard. Far easier it is to draw the wagons around what (and whom) we know than it is to ever open the circle wider to the unknown.

Yet, radical hospitality is important for at least two reasons. Most obvious: Maintaining congregational vitality and health requires always broadening the welcome to new people and ideas. Without a steady influx of renewing spirits, congregations stagnate and die.

But even more important, adopting the spiritual practice of radical hospitality is to grow bigger hearts, to increase in understanding, and to lay down the illusion of separation and isolation. It is to live into this simple truth: We need one another for our own true growing. When “soul meets soul” in deep, enduring ways, both souls are enriched and strengthened.

I have preached on radical hospitality before. This sermon is not that sermon, but I do want to recall some key points about the practice. Radical hospitality comes out of the Benedictine tradition. St. Benedict's rule dwells on welcoming the stranger. In their book *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt write:

“When St. Benedict wrote of hospitality he stressed the importance of welcoming the outsider, the poor, the pilgrim. Benedict understood guests are crucial to the making of a monk... Guests are crucial to the making of any heart. Benedict instructed his monks to welcome the Divine in the stranger. He told them to look

*again, look deeper when you look into the eyes of a stranger. If you want to be a person of great spirit, you can't do life alone...To really grow as a human being you need other people. This conviction permeates Benedict's rule.*ⁱⁱ

Benedict instilled in his monks the belief that any stranger might actually be Christ returned again. Imagine that – being greeted as though you were the most beloved, long yearned for, and now returned again Christ! And even if the guest were a mere mortal, he or she was a beloved child of God – and thus to be welcomed as a gift from God. In Benedictine theology, every one of us is a gift from God. *And* every one of us has the ongoing opportunity to open hearts and arms to the Divine in those around us.

This past week I took part in the Northern New England District's annual fall ministers' retreat. The retreat was held at the Marie Joseph Spiritual Center in Biddeford Pool, a simple retreat center run by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary in a spectacular location at the ocean's edge.

The retreat started on Monday. But I got sick on Sunday – nothing terrible, just a cold. As I sneezed my way through Monday morning, I realized I would have to delay attending the retreat. On Tuesday morning, I felt well enough to go. I arrived, with a box of tissues tucked under my arm, to a retreat that was already underway.

I had missed the orientation the sisters had provided. So I talked in spaces meant to be silent, or sat where people were not meant to congregate. I kept being admonished for rules I didn't know about.

How easy it is for people to arrive in a congregation not knowing “the rules,” practices, or expectations. Radical hospitality means making the conventions transparent and suspending judgment if guests stumble or fumble as they try to learn how to function in an already-established community.

I assiduously tried to keep my germs away from others... keeping to myself, refraining from joining hands at worship services that seemed always to end with a hand holding ritual, going to my room when the program for the day was over instead of staying up and socializing.

In contrast, my colleagues bonded spectacularly well. They sang and played instruments together long into the night. They stayed up until 3 a.m. star-gazing on the beach. As they grew closer to one another, I felt more and more lonely.

The final evening, our closing worship ended with people moving around the circle exchanging hugs as they sang a song. I stayed seated at the edge of the circle to keep my cold germs away. When people walked past me, I put my hands together in front of my face and bowed to them – a far more subdued greeting than the warm hugs everyone was exchanging. My feelings of disconnection and loneliness deepened.

And then. Then one of them broke ranks. “Oh colds be damned!” she exclaimed, and she swooped in and hugged me. As she embraced all of me, with my miserable snuffly nose and my runny eyes, I felt my loneliness dissipate. I felt seen for the gift I was. The illusion of separateness fell away.

Just a small example of hearts opening. But in that tiny scrid of a story, a hint of the expansiveness radical hospitality can bring.

Whether we are here for the first time or the 400th time, the likelihood is high that on some occasions we will arrive feeling broken and vulnerable, sitting at the edge of the circle, while the community is absorbed in its own dance. What a gift to be embraced as a child of God, especially at times like that!

And for the dancers, what a gift it is to look deeply into the eyes of one whose heart has been gladdened by the not-so-simple act of welcoming.

When “soul” meets “soul,” hearts open, the illusion of separation crumbles, and sparks of the Divine rush in. That is the opportunity before us when we welcome all.

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- i Feldman, Christina and Jack Kornfield, 1991. *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart: Parables of the Spiritual Path from Around the World*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco). p. 168.
 - ii Homan, Father Daniel and Lonni Collins Pratt, 2002. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*. (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press.) pp.viii-ix.