

Proper 9 C 2010
St. John's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Susan J. Latimer

At our house, we are getting ready for our California family reunion. Every two years we fly out there to spend time with my mom and my brother's family, and get the 5 boy cousins together for a wild week at the beach. Preparing for this trip has me thinking about the last couple of California trips.

Four years ago the trip happened while I was on sabbatical. My sabbatical was all about connections and the boys and I connected with most of my extended family in California that year

– something we usually don't have time to do. It was a powerful experience.

Three of my cousins and one aunt from my dad's side of the family had never met my children – I had not seen them at all for 15 to 20 years. My mom's side of the family had done a good job of getting together every 4 years or so, so even though their children are more than 10 years older than mine, we all knew each other pretty well.

It was very interesting seeing my kids interact with my cousins and their families. We had a good time with everyone – but there were certainly marked differences in the experiences.

My cousin Tim and his wife Marilyn have no children but an adorable Golden Retriever named Piper who stole all our hearts.

Tim and Marilyn didn't quite know what to do with all the "boy energy", but Piper sure did. Hugh and Franklin managed to completely wear her out – throwing the ball for her into the bay from a beach in sight of the Golden Gate bridge.

Four years ago, Franklin and Hugh had definite ideas about which houses were the most "fun". The two that they picked as favorites were also my favorites, and it wasn't just the "fun" aspect. I've been thinking about it a lot. The places that Franklin and Hugh felt the most comfortable, the most at home, the places they felt most able to be themselves, were the two homes that excelled at hospitality.

Hospitality does not necessarily mean the cleanest house, the best food, the smoothest sheets on the bed . We had beds to sleep in, in many of the places that we visited – but not in the kids’ favorite house. There we slept on the sofas. I’m talking about something else. I like Henri Nouwen’s definition of hospitality:

Hospitality involves creating a place that truly welcomes the stranger.

Hospitality makes room for guests, values their uniqueness, and lets them be themselves. Hospitality does not create unreasonable expectations of the guests.

The two homes in which we experienced the greatest amount of hospitality were very different.

One was on my mother’s side of the family – one was on my dad’s side.

One was the home of one of my cousins who has grown children who already knew my boys.

One was the home of a cousin that I hardly knew, a cousin who had never met the boys, but in their house, within minutes, we also felt at home.

One home was very loosely structured, one had much more structure.

The thing that both homes had in common, though, was a particular feeling – a comfortable feeling. We got a feeling that both families were delighted that we were there.

Both families were truly enjoying their role as hosts.

And not only that - both families were able to talk about difficult things.

These were the households in which the most serious and deepest conversations took place, at least between the adults. Both of these families were able to tell the truth. One shared with me about a very worrisome, as-yet-undiagnosed health problem, and all the anxieties that go along with that. Another shared some old family stories, some of them painful stories, stories that I had not heard.

It’s said that children and animals are a true judge of character.

There is a lot of truth in that. Children and many animals pick up on more subtle cues that many of us lose the ability to read as we grow older body language, a person or place’s energy, the way people express or hide emotions.

Groups of people, over time, develop their own character, their own “feeling tone”. If you have visited people in their homes, you have experienced this. If you have been “church shopping” – or just visiting other churches on occasion, you will know what I mean.

When the words that are said do not match the actions, the feelings, and the character of the group, that group’s hospitality will be lacking. The family that we visited who took us out to dinner and gave us our own beds, we experienced as the least hospitable place, because the underlying message we got was that we were a burden to them. In fairness to them, we visited them at a really bad time – we really were a burden to them - but instead of us all talking about that and acknowledging the difficulty, we all tried too hard to be “polite”. That cut us off from any really deep conversation we might have had.

Today’s Gospel passage from Luke is all about hospitality. Jesus sends pairs of disciples out ahead of him as a kind of “advance guard” for his visit to many and various places. He tells the disciples to rely completely on the hospitality of the people they meet. He tells them, “If people welcome you, stay there, heal the sick, and proclaim the kingdom of God. If people do not welcome you, do not stay there, or heal, but proclaim the kingdom of God anyway.”

St. John's mission statement is all about hospitality:

*We reach out to the world in Christ's name
in the hope that all might find a home in God's healing love.*

++++ *That all might find a home in God's healing love* +++++

I have a vision of this parish living into our mission in a deep and lasting way.

We can be a place of radical hospitality.

We can create a space here that truly welcomes the stranger
– no matter how different that person may be from any one of us.
We can be a place where God's love is shown to *everyone*, and lived out more deeply.

What would this place be like if everyone felt at home here -

no matter our political or theological positions,

no matter our occupations,

whether we are single or partnered or married, divorced or widowed

whether or not we have children or grandchildren

whether we are introverts or extraverts, intuitive or sensing, thinking or feeling types,

whether we are drawn first to action or to contemplation.

We can be that safe, welcoming place
where everyone is invited to become the person God intends for them to be.

We can be a place where people are supported and encouraged
to find and develop their God-given gifts and talents,
which are unique to each person.

In order to do this, we will need to be intentional.

We will learn to go beyond “polite” conversation with each other,
and find a way to have deep and meaningful dialogue
– truth-telling – with compassion, and in love,

especially about difficult things

especially when we disagree about important things.

Diana Butler Bass, who has studied hundreds of modern congregations,
says that ***“Nostalgia is the enemy of hope”***.

Sometimes nostalgia for the past can keep us from finding hope for the
future.

Sometimes nostalgia can get in the way of seeing the way God is working
with us right now, at this very moment.

St. John’s hope – our hope – that all might find a home in God’s healing
love: that hope can be the fuel for our transformation into the parish God is
calling us to be.