

The Gracious Guest

Luke 10:1-11

Covenant Network of Presbyterians National Conference

November 3, 2011

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On the 10th anniversary weekend of Sept. 11 this year, when millions of Americans gathered to remember and to grieve, over 250 Christians and Muslims met at the Islamic Society of Milwaukee for a different kind of conversation about our post 9-11 world. Focused on the theme, *From Tolerance to Empathy*, this interfaith crowd—60% Christian, 40% Muslim, spent the day in thoughtful conversation, asking, “How do we move from tolerating our differences, to a deeper level of relationship by walking in each other’s shoes?”

A carload of Lutherans from a tiny town in Northwest Wisconsin drove four hours to be a part of this event because these folks had never met a Muslim. (Where I live, Garrison Keillor’s *Lake Wobegon* is a real place!) Dozens of other Christians came from around the state; they had met Muslims but had never spent much time conversing about our similarities and differences, which was the promise of this special day.

The facilitators of our workshop were two remarkable sociologists from Penn State, Sam Richards and Laurie Mulvey, who dedicate their lives teaching students how to be in relationship with people across the divide of race and class and sexual orientation and religion and nationality.

As a part of their class work, they require all of their students during the 16-week semester to encounter people who are different than they are in a structured, intentional and reflective way. If you are a practicing Christian, spend the semester visiting the Hillel Center each week. If you are white, hang out at the Black Student Union. If you are an ardent Democrat, attend the weekly meetings of the College Republicans. If you are a heterosexual, the LGBT Center on campus is the place you need to be. Whoever you are, step outside your worldview for the next four months, and into someone else’s.

As you can imagine, this simple assignment to men and women in their late teens or early 20’s is met with great resistance and has also resulted in great transformation, as we heard and experienced on that bright Sept day.

The Muslim leaders from the Islamic Society were our hosts for the workshop, offering their facilities, welcoming us as new friends, feeding us a Middle Eastern lunch, providing the kind of hospitality necessary for their new Christian guests to feel safe enough for a conversation that quickly became very intimate.

As the day began I sensed how unnerving this whole experience felt for many of us Christians. Most of us had never visited the *Salaam* School, the Muslim K-12 school in Milwaukee, where we met. Unnerving, I suspect, because this was a complete role reversal from our safer, more comfortable default position. We in the church are much more at ease when *we’re* the gracious hosts, the ones providing the hospitality, the ones doing the welcoming, preparing the space, and providing food for table fellowship.

In fact most us take it for granted that being a gracious host is central to our identity as Christians. As a member of the congregational life committee at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Madison,

where I attend, we have spent endless hours strategizing about how to be such a host when someone new enters our doors on Sunday morning.

Do we give them a name tag? Serve them donuts or bagels? Do we introduce them in the worship service? Present them with a welcome gift? Give them a tour of the building? And on it goes.

Never mind the fact that fewer and fewer people in North America have any interest in our hospitality. Our default position is: 'Well, we have a job to do...to be the gracious host!'

Maybe I shouldn't be so surprised by what I witnessed at the *Salaam* School on Sept. 10th. Over 150 Christians who were completely out of their element and on someone else's turf for an entire day, dependent on the hospitality of strangers, *Muslim* strangers no less, and frankly, except for our common cultural commitment to being "Midwest nice," not really sure how to behave.

This is not the first time the Christian Church has been called upon to switch roles.

By the time the gospel of Luke and its companion volume Acts were written centuries ago, the early church has now entered its second generation. It has vivid memories of its founding and development. It can go back to the church in Jerusalem, to those great missionaries Peter and Paul, and vividly recall the outflowing and movement of God.

All of that, at the time Luke is writing--in the late 70's or early 80's of the first century--has become the past, not the present. And the expectations that had been so central to their life, that Christ would return very quickly, that Jerusalem and the temple would be the center of the church, that this would be Judaism writ large. Many of those expectations had failed to come about.

Now little Gentile house churches dotting the Roman Empire are asking, "What went wrong? How come things have not turned out as we expected?"

Another question that was beginning to percolate: "How do we know what God is up to?" We thought that God was about a certain set of things around Jerusalem, the temple, promises of the Hebrew Scriptures...but Jerusalem has been destroyed and temple is now gone.

And a third question rumbling around those house churches of the late first century: "What does it mean to be church in this changed context?"

Here is Luke's answer: you'll never know what God is up to by staying inside the walls of our churches and acting like the gracious host. What you're going to have to do is to take the risk of getting outside those walls and go into the neighborhoods and communities surrounding you, and then you need to be willing to enter the homes and sit at the tables of strangers you do not know and who may have absolutely no connection with your church or the Christian faith, and enter the stories and narratives of those strangers...because somewhere in those stories and narratives are the clues to what God is up to in the world today and what it means to be the church.

And by the way, Jesus says, as you head out the door, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." The first step to becoming the gracious guest is to ask the question, what do we need to leave behind? What isn't necessary? For Jesus, all the material things are of secondary importance...our money, our buildings, whatever material possessions that give us a false sense of security. What matters are the gifts and graces that each of us possess, our vulnerability that Jesus creates by asking us to take nothing with us, our utter dependence on the providence of God by traveling so light.

What else do we need to leave behind? Perhaps some prejudices about the people we will meet, perhaps some misconceptions about our neighborhood, perhaps some old patterns of being and doing church that are standing in the way of moving out beyond our walls. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. The shift from being gracious host to gracious guest begs the question: What do we need to let go of, what do we need to leave behind?

One of the largest, most vibrant companies near Madison is Epic Systems, which develops and markets medical records software. Half of its workforce of 4,000 is under the age of 35, most are single, and most live within a mile and a half of the State Capitol, right in the middle of downtown Madison. And on any particular Sunday morning, these young folks from Epic Systems fill the urban coffee houses that dot the landscape of our city, many of them, I suspect, caffeinating their hangovers.

Last week I had lunch with the very capable rector of Grace Episcopal Church, which sits across the street from our Capitol. As soon as I mentioned Epic Systems to Father Jonathan, I could see the look of exhaustion on his face. "I spend 60 hours a week maintaining this church," he said, getting a little defensive with me. "I don't have time. I just don't have time."

"Carry no purse, no bag no sandals." What do we need to leave behind? What isn't necessary?

And as you head out the door with no purse, no bag and no sandals, be prepared, Jesus says to "eat what is set before you." Receiving hospitality from strangers through table fellowship is Luke's primary means of becoming a gracious guest. But table fellowship of the sort that we aren't used to in the church. The kind of conversation that happens when we are invited to a table by strangers.

At our table on Sept. 10 was a Muslim college student attending Marquette University in Milwaukee. About two hours into our conversation, the retired Methodist pastor sitting next to me asked her about the *hajib* she was wearing, the traditional Muslim headdress for women. Was her decision to wear the *hajib* a free choice, or a requirement of her religion, or was she pressured by her parents to don the traditional Muslim garb? The young woman blushed. No Christian had ever asked her such a direct question.

She told us it was her choice, growing out of several years of prayerful discernment. The Christians at our table were moved by her reverence and commitment to reflect on our own reverence and commitment to Christ. She then went on to talk about the complexities and messiness of teenage rebellion in Muslim families, and her own struggles with her parents. The Methodist pastor, a preacher's kid, said to her, "Well, let me tell you about teenage rebellion in Christian families..." He had lots of first-hand experience!

This kind of table fellowship is God's way of leveling the playing field, moving the church out of the privileged and power-oriented position of giving, of being the host, to the weaker position of receiving, by being the guest. It frees us to move into a posture of openness, vulnerability and reciprocity, to pay attention to the other in a way we couldn't do if we were in charge of the hospitality.

That's exactly what happened at our Sept. 10th gathering. Freed from the responsibilities of being the host, many of us Christians were able to focus and to listen—for hours—to the struggles and experiences, the hopes and the heartaches of our Muslim neighbors.

Jesus also mentions that gracious guests always bring a blessing to any table they are invited to share: "Peace be with this house." Peace, *shalom*: a rich word in the scriptures suggesting the presence and the real possibility of wholeness, healing, and restoration-- all signs that the reign of God is drawing near.

Dan Kimball is a twenty-something pastor helping to lead an emergent congregation on the west coast. Early in his ministry he realized that the demands of pastoral work had a way of keeping him inside the church bubble, as he calls it, and he was losing touch with the outside world, and so he did something quite courageous, in my view. He set aside time each week to go into his community and strike up conversations with perfect strangers in places where young adults congregate.

Over time he has developed friendships with a cadre of folks who either grew up in the church and left, or have never darkened our doors.

Kimball summarizes these conversations in his book, *They like Jesus but not the Church*. He confirms anecdotally what sociologists like Robert Putman have concluded from the survey data in recent years. Ask a young adult if he or she likes Jesus and the answer is probably yes. But ask if that person likes the church, or organized religion, and chances are you will get a far less favorable response.

One of the striking things about Pastor Dan's conversations with these young strangers is how much apologizing he does. Apologizing for all kinds of misdeeds in Christian history for which pastor Dan bears no personal responsibility. Apologizing for the church's historic mistreatment of women. Apologizing that certain segments of American Christianity are married to a particular political party. Pastor Dan's is a ministry of apology.

We know that apology is never enough. Jesus tells his disciples that the words of blessing--of healing and restoration-- must be matched by deeds. At best a heartfelt apology is a step *towards* healing, a way of being vulnerable and opening up space for dialogue with the strangers we meet.

Apology, I suspect, will be a necessary part of the conversation as the Presbyterian Church now moves out beyond these walls to become the gracious guest of the gay and lesbian community, or any community that does not look upon us with favor.

Kimball says, "Countless numbers of people who like Jesus but not the church are open to receiving an apology from the church and even to forgiving the church when forgiveness is needed. But first they need to be in a relationship with someone they can trust."¹

Jesus knows that this role reversal—from gracious host to gracious guest--will not be easy. "You are like sheep among the wolves," he tells the 70 disciples. This will be a risky endeavor, this different way of being church. There will be uncertainty as to how we will be received in the wider community and not everyone we meet will welcome us. There will be new skills to learn that most of us were never taught in Seminary. There will be difficulty and set-backs. There will be enormous resistance from those inside the church who are oh, so comfortable waiting for the world to enter our doors and receive our hospitality.

¹ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 253.

But in taking this risk we are treading a well-worn path, the path of Jesus himself, whose life, death and resurrection point to the One who is the great host of the universe, the One who in Jesus Christ comes to rely on the world's hospitality.² The One who has gone ahead of us, out these doors with no purse, no bag and no sandals and into the world to eat at table with all kinds of strangers, the One who has gone ahead of us bringing blessing and healing to every corner of our hurting world, the One who is calling us out beyond these walls to join him in that work.

So as we come to the Table this evening, let us be reminded of who is our gracious host.

Let us come to the Table, asking for the courage to let go of whatever is holding our church back.

Let us come to the Table prepared to offer our greatest gift for this risky work, ourselves and our vulnerability.

Let us come to the Table, ready and eager to bring blessing to any table we're invited to share.

Let us come to this Table to be a gracious guest.

Amen.

² See Craig Van Gelder & Dwight Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2011), 132f.