

A Pandemic of Hospitality

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Scripture: Luke 24:13-35 “The Road to Emmaus”

It was about 5:30 in the morning when I pulled up to the terminal at Akron-Canton Airport to pick up my niece Audrey. She was supposed to have flown to Cleveland Hopkins airport which is just 7 miles from our house. Instead she ended up at Akron-Canton airport, 55 miles farther away. Oh, and she didn't arrive by airplane, either. But let me explain.

Several years ago Audrey had spent a college semester studying in New York City. The term was over so she was going to fly back to her home on the West Coast. Her father – my older brother Joe – had booked for her the least-expensive airfare to Eugene, Oregon. This bargain itinerary was a transcontinental hopscotch to numerous airports across the country. Brother Joe wanted to use this rare opportunity for his daughter to visit with her Uncle Jon and Aunt Mary in Cleveland for a day or two.

About the time Audrey should have been catching her flight from LaGuardia to Cleveland Hopkins I started getting texts from her telling me that that her flight was delayed (I don't remember if it was weather or equipment problems or what). Then delayed some more. And again a few more times. Finally, the airline cancelled the flight. “Come back tomorrow morning,” they told the long line of weary and frustrated passengers.

As often happens in such experiences of shared frustration, Audrey got to know the women standing near her in line. Two were from Akron, the third from nearby Alliance, Ohio; they were co-workers who had gone to New York on business. She heard them discuss their options: camp out in the airport overnight, or try to take a shuttle to a nearby hotel for a few hours' rest. Then one said, “You know... if we rented a car, we could be home before that flight even takes off tomorrow morning... IF the flight leaves at all!” Quick agreement among the Akron trio had one woman running off to the rental car counter.

The other two looked at their young college student friend doomed to be stranded in the Big Apple. “Audrey, Akron isn't too far from Cleveland. If we could get you to Akron and we dropped you off at some safe public spot – say, the Akron airport – would that help you?”

Audrey said that if Akron wasn't too far from Cleveland she thought her uncle would be willing to drive there to pick her up. And that is how I ended up fetching my niece Audrey at 5:30 in the morning from a distant airport that she didn't fly into.

How did three businesswomen come to decide to offer hospitality to a total stranger? If you could see and hear my niece, she doesn't come across as threatening in the least. Tall, slight, quiet voice, exuding a certain small-town innocence. All that, along with the casual conversation she'd shared with those women, stirred their hearts to open their lives to her, inviting her into their fellowship, giving her a space to snooze on an impromptu overnight trip in a rental car.

Audrey's spur-of-the-moment "invite" reminded me of the experience Jesus had while walking the road from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus with Mr. and Mrs. Cleopas. Those three had become acquainted by a chance encounter on the road. They developed acquaintance through conversation.

Dusk began to settle as they approached the couple's destination. They invited Jesus—a stranger, so they thought—to accept their offer of food to eat and a place to stay the night. They invited him right into the privacy of the very home where they ate and slept and shared life together.

In some way it was like an episode of the program "Undercover Boss": Mr. and Mrs. Cleopas didn't realize that they knew who he was, but they felt a connection with their fellow traveler. They resonated with his description of God: gracious, not demanding; forgiving, not condemning; inclusive, not judgmental.

When people study the story of the Road to Emmaus the usual focus deals with what Jesus did when preparing to dine with his hosts. He took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it... the very same actions he had done at the Last Supper: "took... blessed... broke... gave." It was in those actions that Mr. and Mrs. Cleopas recognized Jesus.

But reading the story this time I was struck by something else. On another level, the story of the road to Emmaus is a story about hospitality, about connecting with strangers.

This may seem like a bad time to talk about making connections with strangers. We're doing our best to stay away, not just from strangers but even friends and family who aren't in our household. And it seems counter to our experience of Christianity to be keeping our distance.

The reality is that we just don't know when we'll be able to come together again in churches, restaurants, stadiums, theatres. Even then, it may be some time after gatherings are *allowed* before *you* may feel comfortable and safe coming together with others.

But until then we can plant seeds of hospitality where we are: "inviting into our lives" so to speak, the people we encounter even in these days of limited mobility and interaction.

There are so many opportunities for us to extend a hospitable spirit.

- Perhaps it's the appreciation you can show the employee who is bringing your meals to your apartment each day while the dining room remains closed for safety's sake.
- Maybe you can extend the hospitality of Christ-like patience toward the people who seem oblivious to your desire to observe proper social distancing and other behaviors intended for the common good.

Or what if you offered hospitality through positivity? Day by day the reality becomes clearer that a lot of things we look forward to each spring and summer (and maybe even autumn) are going to be very different from what we're used to, or won't be possible at all this year: sports, concerts, weddings and funerals and worship, recreation activities, travel, Vacation Bible School, parties, reunions, and more.

We feel the weight of loss just thinking about what we'll miss out on in the months ahead. So how can we be the ones inviting our families and neighbors and communities to experience the hospitality of optimism—not ignoring our loss, but highlighting all that is still available to us:

- expressing gratitude through brief phone calls or simple notes of thanks – perhaps to neighbors, teachers, first responders, local or state officials ;
- bringing new life to old games or puzzles collecting dust in your home which would find new life when shared with families in your area;
- the joy of conversations over the fence or across the street;
- appreciating Mother Nature’s unfolding beauty of spring and summer which proceeds without concern for stay-at-home restrictions;
- being transported to a different time and place by a book to read or film to watch;
- the opportunity to use our health and strength to lend a hand to more vulnerable people who need some help with ordinary tasks like shopping or home maintenance in order to remain safe;
- and from the other point of view, if we are in that class of folks who are “more vulnerable,” we can offer the hospitality of appreciation by accepting the offers of people who are able and willing to help us out in these unique times.

Seeing today’s world with eyes of faith, you can lift your spirits and the spirit of others by recognizing all the blessings that still fill our lives.

We may be accustomed to thinking of “hospitality” as the act of welcoming someone into our space, but hospitality can be more than that, and more subtle than that:

- Being generous with your attention and your time is a way of showing hospitality.
- Showing true concern for someone is an act of hospitality.
- Displaying exceeding patience, graciously forgiving, assuming positive intent on the part of others – those are all ways of sharing the gift of hospitality.

In the midst of this time when we’re staying closer to home than ever before, it might seem out-of-place to encourage us to think about how we can grow in our ability to offer hospitality. Because our range of activities is restricted and the world we’re engaged with is so contained, it’s easy for us to become inwardly focused. We can find ourselves thinking almost exclusively about how all this is impacting me, my household, my extended family.

But Jesus is walking with us. He’s opening our eyes to see what’s happening in a new way. There may never have been a better opportunity than now for us to show Christ-inspired hospitality to those around us. This time encourages us to “take the church to where the people are.”

Our attitude and action can bear witness that the way we live our lives is because Jesus Christ guards and guides our heart, filling us with expansive mercy and generous love to share with the world.