

Part 8: We are a hospitable conference.

Ramelia Williams is a Masters of Divinity candidate at North Park Theological Seminary and a Preaching Pastor at New Community Covenant Church in Chicago, IL.



When I think about the hospitality of God, I am reminded of the authentic welcoming hospitality offered to a stranger, late one Wednesday evening at a historical African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina. Cynthia Hurd, 54, Ethel Lance, 70, Tywanza Sanders, 26, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, 49, Rev. Sharonda Singleton, 45, Rev. Daniel Simmons Sr., 74, Myra Thompson, 59, and Susie Jackson, 87. These are the Charleston 9, nine African-American Christian hospitable human beings who were slain in a racially motivated mass shooting by a racist white gunman. The criminal responsible for this heinous crime later communicated his hesitation to proceed with the demonic plan because of the hospitable and pleasant way his anticipated victims embraced him for the hour he joined them in Bible study. I find eerie parallel in Jesus explaining the guidelines for how His disciples are to engage people as they set out on a trial missionary journey. “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:8). The hospitable embrace of the townspeople was to be a signpost of their authenticity, a people of God with whom they could feel safe and find rest among. The hospitality shown to the disciples by the townspeople would subsequently be met with blessings of truth and healing bestowed upon their community. But the radical hospitality of the Charleston 9, offered to the Judas among them at the table, instead brought brokenness and their demise. Likewise, I am reminded the radical hospitality of God, embodied in the life of Jesus also brought His demise.

While hospitality is mostly a benign proposition, it *can* be scary or dangerous, but it’s necessary. To increase the attendance numbers on the church roll? Quite the contrary, hospitality is necessary; “to bear witness to the hospitable God to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It’s necessary because we can’t establish a Church that unifies every tribe, every nation, and every culture if we will not welcome others into our spaces of vulnerability.

We might be tempted to consider the Charleston 9’s vulnerable actions unorthodox hospitality. We may render them a good example of why we ought not radically welcome strangers we don’t know and trust into our churches, homes or lives. But in the early church, this would not have been seen as unconventional. Gracious hospitality to “the other,” one of a divergent social class, different ethnicity or economic standing, was the mark of the early Christian whose heart and life had been changed by a Christ encounter. Boldness about their faith and exemplifying the radical love and hospitality of Jesus was a well-known life threatening risk. The black church has likewise often risked being a target of racial hatred. But its arms of love and welcome remain open, through slavery and Jim Crow and segregation and cross burnings and lynchings and police brutality and racism...reminiscent of the vulnerable open arms of Jesus outstretched on the cross. Theologian Amos Yong penned it this way, “Christian

mission is the embodiment of divine hospitality that loves strangers, to the point of giving up our lives on behalf of others as to be reconciled to them, that they might in turn be reconciled to God.”

The Charleston 9 presents a model for our reconciliation in the coming kingdom of God. They point our hope towards a Revelation kingdom with jeweled walls, a tree of life with succulent fruit and kingdom gates that are never shut and locked. Security video clips from the day of the attack reveal the villain entering the church through an unlocked side door. Revelation reads, “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (21:25, 27). This is a picture of a kingdom where there is no threat of danger to the divine hospitality of God being offered openly and freely to all. The Charleston 9 provides a model of this future hope we can live into as Christians.

Bible Study

Hospitable Hearts

I did a lot of travelling this summer. As a student on a strict budget, it was imperative that I depend on the hospitality of family and friends in order to enjoy as many trips as I did. Without their gracious hospitality that provided local travel, food, bedding and warm showers, I could not have afforded so many trips. None of these hosts welcomed me with a sense of obligation. Instead, each of these hosts invited me as guest and received me in their home to share time and space with them for a few days. Hospitality is about making space for others in your life. To welcome others this way costs you something. It can cost you time, attention, food, patience, discomfort, inconvenience and interruption to your normal routine.

Jesus’ ministry in the earth placed Him quite often in the position of guest to numerous hosts, including Mary’s womb and a borrowed tomb. He was accustomed to depending on the hospitality of others as was typical in Jewish culture. Jesus even instructed the disciples to depend on welcoming hospitality in the places where He was sending them to minister to the people (Luke 9:1-6; 10:3-9). The hospitality of the welcoming host was to be a sign that this was a place they were called to bless the people with truth and healing miracles. Theologian Amos Yong said, “Those who welcome Jesus into their homes become, in turn, guests of the redemptive hospitality of God.” The hospitable heart is necessary to extend authentic hospitality to others.

One way that we define the Central Conference of the ECC is as a hospitable people. What does it mean to live fully into that part of our identity? Are we willing to sacrifice in order to extend a radical welcome that exposes the lavish hospitality of God? Let’s look at 2 passages of Scripture that can give us deeper insight into the heart of people that offer this kind of lavish hospitality.

Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42
The Good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37

A major theme of the Gospel of Luke is that acceptance of “the other” is an indication you understand the reality of the kingdom of God and its goal to bring salvation to the masses, not just a select few. Through Jesus’ ministry we are introduced to an inclusive and welcoming faith tradition. Luke shows us the willingness of the oppressed, foreigner and outcast to accept this alternative religious worldview more quickly than the dogmatic Jewish religious leaders. This book highlights one of the categories of outcasts by portraying the significant role women played in the life and ministry of Jesus against the backdrop of a misogynistic society. “The other” and the outcast are emphasized because of Jesus’ compassionate eye toward the sick and suffering, which He always sought to be near and heal. In the face of our sinful heart condition, which does not allow us to always instinctively welcome others in this way, Luke also exposes us to a theme of repentance; a humble turning back to God to realign our hearts with God’s will for us to live in authentic community.

Living in authentic community was difficult for Jews and Samaritans who had deep disdain for one another. Samaritans were considered Jewish “half-breeds,” being born from the union of Gentiles and Jews that inhabited Jerusalem during a time of exile. Authentic communal living was also a challenge for women who were treated like property more than complementary partners in life and ministry. It was shameful for women to be taught, especially by a rabbi as he was teaching other men. Jesus welcomed individuals His societal context determined didn’t deserve to be welcomed. His heart of compassion compelled Him to welcome them.

Questions:

1. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer expresses perfect knowledge of Scriptural law. But Jesus communicates that more is required. What is the more that is required as expressed in verses 28 & 37? How does this contradict what Jesus allows in the Mary/ Martha passage in verse 39? How do you reconcile what Jesus intended His audiences to understand by these seemingly mixed messages?
2. The hospitality of God should be evident where the truth of the Gospel is being preached. How and by whom is the hospitality of God displayed in the Good Samaritan passage? How and by whom is the hospitality of God displayed in the Mary/Martha passage? In what ways do you display the hospitality of God in your life? In what ways does your church exhibit the hospitality of God beyond the church community?
3. Look up Psalm 27:4 and note how it relates to the “one thing” Jesus emphasizes in Luke 10:42. How does this further explain the “one thing” Mary chose? How does this relate to the hospitality of God?
4. Look up Matthew 9:36 and note how it relates to Luke 10:33. What does this teach you about the motivation of hospitality?

5. In the Good Samaritan passage, the Levite, Priest and Samaritan each “saw him,” the victim on the road (Verses 10:31-33). But there was a difference in the way each of them “saw him.” Reread this entire passage and replace the word neighbor with the words *a human* or *humanity*, as is appropriate. (Example: Vs. 29 “and who is *human*?”) How does your perception of this passage change?

6. Both Martha and the lawyer are struggling with extending authentic welcome to Jesus. Martha questioned Jesus’ authority as a Jewish leader because He allowed Mary to behave unconventionally as she sat to learn from Him in the place of a disciple. The lawyer questioned Jesus’ ability to answer a perplexing question about Jewish Deuteronomic law. Their ability to host Jesus in their hearts was conditioned upon Him meeting their expectations for a traditional rabbi. Each of them had underlying obstacles to their full embrace of Jesus. What were those obstacles? Where in your life have you exhibited these obstacles to being hospitable to others? Identify other obstacles to your or your church’s extension of authentic hospitality. What are some practical ways you can overcome these obstacles?