

# The Welcome Mat

Luke 7:36-50  
July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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This summer we are doing a series on gifts of the Spirit. This morning I want to talk about the gift of hospitality.

Everyone who follows Jesus has spiritual gifts. Hospitality, like prayer, is a universal gift of the Spirit. That means we are all called to practice the gift of hospitality, just like we are all called to pray. Now some of you are particularly good at making others feel welcome. For some this is a spiritual gift: a special calling from God and it is part of the unique way that you are called to make a difference for the church and for the world.

In the last few weeks I've practiced this gift quite a bit. A couple of weeks ago my uncle (my mother's brother who married a Norwegian) came to Canada with his kids and their significant others and his granddaughter Molly. Cat called it the 'Norwegian Invasion'. Between my parents' house and ours we put them up along with other add-ons like my brother and his wife and various cousins who wanted to see the Norwegian family. Every night there was a giant dinner at my parents' house or ours, and during the day there were various touring activities. We all then proceeded to PEI where the wonderful family reunion continued. So if I look a little tired after my vacation, you'll understand. It was a ton of fun and we dearly miss them already.

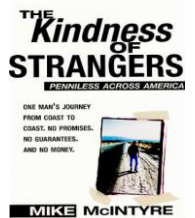
A bunch of years ago -- I'm going to say 10 but I can't remember -- the Rev. Connie denBok (our Anniversary Speaker last year), came to Wall Street to lead a workshop on Spiritual Gifts. As Cathie mentioned we will be doing one again in the fall to help you figure out what your Spiritual Gifts are. Part of the process is filling out a questionnaire for yourself and then you get others who know you to fill one out about you. Sometimes others see things in ourselves that we can't see... and sometimes not. Anyway I remember when my mother came to me and said she thought she had the gift of hospitality. I remember saying "Mom, you know I love you, there is no way that you have the gift of hospitality!" My mother and Martha Stewart have nothing in common. Don't get me wrong -- my mom has a ton of gifts that I admire: the depth of her faith, her *joie de vivre*, and her ability to laugh at herself are among them, but putting on fabulous dinners and hosting teas is not something she excels at. I mean she can pull it off, but if I were to list her best qualities, entertaining would not make the top 10. In my mind there was something wrong with the questionnaire if it somehow calculated that she had the gift of hospitality.

But it turned out there was nothing wrong with the questionnaire. My mother *does* have the gift of hospitality. You see, what I realized in one of those great *Aha!* moments was that hospitality is not about being in *Better Homes & Gardens* or about being skilled in the culinary arts. In fact, sometimes those things can be blocks to hospitality. Hospitality is about making someone feel welcome. It is about making another person feel *at home* in your home. Hospitality must not be confused with entertaining. Entertaining says, "Come to my house; admire my possessions; see the beautiful way the table is laid. Enjoy the scrumptious food that has taken me all week to prepare. See how perfectly neat and tidy and clean my house is. Come and listen to my views and thoughts." Entertaining is about trying to show how wonderful and perfect we are. Hospitality is totally different. In fact, it's often when we're open about not being perfect that people can feel more at home and relax with us, and enjoy our company.

The theme of hospitality, particularly hospitality to strangers is *huge* in the Bible, in the Old Testament and the New. Look at Leviticus 19:33&34: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." That is very key. The Jewish people are constantly reminded that they were once strangers themselves. Then there is the clear message in Hebrews 13:2: "Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!"

In 1994, a 37-year-old man by the name of Mike McIntyre decided to confront his fears and the shaky path his life was taking. Living in San Francisco at the time, he left his job, his girlfriend, his apartment - all the trappings of his life, and decided to hitchhike across America. He headed for Cape Fear, North Carolina, a location he selected for its name, which symbolized his fear of many things in life. He put a few things in a backpack, but to help him with this confrontation with his fears, he left behind the one thing most of us would not consider leaving home without. Can you guess what that was?

He decided he wanted to find some kindness in the soul of America, so he took with him absolutely no cash, no credit cards, no traveler's checks - no purchasing power of any kind. Not a cent. Instead, he decided, he would rely on the kindness of strangers. Even from them, he vowed, he would take no money, but would accept food, shelter, rides, and friendship. As he worked his way across the country, he found it was possible to do exactly that. He made the entire journey without money. He didn't eat as regularly as he would have if he were carrying cash, yet he received enough food to get by and was sheltered in people's homes along the way.



He stayed one night with an older woman who was caring for her brain-damaged granddaughter, yet she welcomed him, too. On another occasion, he found a sense of family on a South Dakota ranch. Elsewhere, he was taken in by a low-income couple that gave him a tent to take with him, even though it was one of their most valuable possessions.

Not everyone he met along the way was kind and generous, but most were. To say it was a life changing experience is an understatement. But my guess is that his journey changed not just his life, but many other lives too. I believe that what hospitality is really about is making space: making space in our home, in our church, in our communities for others. We have to make space physically but also we need to make space in our lives for the other.

I believe that our church Wall Street has a special calling to hospitality. It begins with our Sunday morning greeters. If you have this gift, please consider joining this wonderful group. Of course hospitality, hostel, hospice and hospital all have the same root. They all carry a sense of refuge and care. God is calling us here to make more room in our church for strangers. That seems like an odd or perhaps even obvious thing to say. Obviously we have space for people in this church. Just about every mainline church is in brain-wracking mode, desperately trying to figure out how to get more people to come to church.

On the surface, making room doesn't look like a big problem. The question is, are we prepared to make room for the people that God wants to send to our church? I'm not talking about physical space, though that is part of it. Making room, making people feel comfortable is partly about the physical space, but mostly it's about the space in our hearts. Are we willing to make room in our hearts for the people that God wants to send to us; to be loved by us? Over the years we have prayed the frightening prayer: "God send us the people that no one else wants." We have made it a priority in our church to offer space to Recovery groups like AA and OA and to make Recovery part of our ministry. More recently we have discerned a call to make space for the gay community that has been on the margins of society and particularly cut off from church and Christian community. Yesterday we had a wonderful celebration here with the marriage of Heather and Suzanne. As people from all over, many from New York state, came forward for communion, I felt God's blessing flow through the church.

Our tag line is '*God loves ALL. So do we*'. The first part of the tag line is obvious, the second is part has a whole lot to do with the action of hospitality. How do we show others that they are loved by God—that they belong?

I want to tell you a true story about a true incident that happened to Tony Campolo a few years ago. You may have heard this well-known story before, but I always say that a good story is worth hearing again.

A few years ago Tony flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. The way he tells it, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3:00 a.m. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide awake and his stomach is growling. He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast.

Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The fat guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?" Well, Tony isn't so hungry anymore so eyeing some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee." As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, when Tony Campolo heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the fat guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?" "Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?" "Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here." His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake. At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it

looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. There were hookers wall to wall.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over. And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!" But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want." "Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony.

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?"

And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes, for her life, her health, and her salvation. Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those moments when just the right words come, Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

What kind of church do we belong to? My prayer is that we will be the kind of church and the kind of Christians who aren't just friendly to our friends but rather are willing to risk making room in our hearts for the people that God sends our way who so desperately need to hear the message that God loves them. As you make room in your heart for others, you will find yourself in turn transformed and filled with the love of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Mike McIntyre, *The Kindness of Strangers: Penniless Across America* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group; Berkley trade paperback edition, 1996), pp. 245-246.