

## **Hospitality** **2 Sam.11:26-12:10; Luke 7:36- 8:3**

We are so used to thinking that Bibles are to be read that we forget that for centuries most people, like many people in the third world today, could not read and so the stories and precepts we read in our Bibles were told as stories, read aloud or incorporated in sermons. This is especially true of the Hebrew scriptures, which often circulated orally for a time before being written. Even when written they were often framed as oral stories. In 2 Samuel we read such a story. The prophet Nathan (his name means “he is sent”) has come to King David with a message, which he knows the king, will not like. Shrewdly he tells a story which deliberately sounds like an appeal for justice from the king, acting in his role as Judge. He sets the scene: two men in the city, one rich and other poor, the poor man with only a pet lamb, the rich man with many flocks, a traveler comes to the rich man seeking hospitality, and the rich man takes the poor man’s lamb to feed his guest!

You and I can easily understand how wrong that is. We could understand even more clearly if we remember the hospitality rules of the ancient near east. I have been re-examining the Odyssey by listening to an audiotope course, which examines the themes and issues. One major theme of the Odyssey is the theme of *Xenia* or “guest-host relationship. Several

times, Odysseus wakes up on a strange shore and wonders if the people are hospitable or barbaric. It was incumbent on civilized people to provide, shelter, food, clothing and a bath to any stranger who came seeking *Xenia*.

The same sort of rule applied the nomads of the desert and in the towns of ancient Israel. It was taken very seriously. The crime for which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed is their lack of hospitality; Lot and his family are saved precisely because they were hospitable to the angels. Thus, as Nathan tells David of the un-civilized behavior of the rich man, and his greedy, selfish ways, the king's wrath is kindled and he passes judgment: "The man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold..." He may deserve the ultimate punishment but it is more just to repay the poor man for his loss. Nathan, like Hamlet seeking to "catch the conscience of the king" has sprung the trap. "You are the man!" You were not content with being raised from shepherd boy to king, you have stolen your neighbor's wife, Bathsheba, and you have even compassed her husband's death to cover your crime. David, like the rich man in the story, will not himself die for his crime, but he will pay dearly.

David may continue to be a great king but he will suffer for his domestic failures, violence will dog his household and the child born of the adultery will die. We may be a bit squeamish about thinking that God would

punish a father through the death of an innocent child but we are looking at a world where almost the only justice is either vengeance or monetary payment for transgressions. In fact, even today, many crimes carry the seeds of their own punishment within the circumstances of the crime.

What a contrast we see when we look at Luke's account of the hospitality Jesus received at the home of a prominent Pharisee. We can picture the scene easily. The low table is set; Jesus is invited to lie next to the host who doubtless expects both a diverting and possibly informative conversation with this noted traveling rabbi and the public approbation, which would accompany the Pharisee's open-minded hospitality. We might understand if the Pharisee thinks the invitation and the meal is sufficient hospitality. After all, the Pharisee is rich by comparison with this itinerant preacher. The Pharisee is also rather proud of his standing in the religious community, he is demonstrating his open-mindedness, and when a woman of the city comes to the table and begins to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and dry them with her hair, kissing his feet, and anointing them with precious ointment, he is understandably offended. How dare this woman come un-invited to his dinner party? If Jesus is the prophet people claim, how come he does not know this woman's reputation? (We do not ask how he knows her reputation, though it is perhaps intriguing question)

Jesus teaches his lesson with a brief question. If a man forgave two debts, one large and the other trifling, who would love him more? Upon the admission that the one forgiven the large debt would be more grateful, Jesus proceeds to criticize the Pharisee's hospitality pointing out that he had not really properly welcomed him with the generally required foot washing (normally done by a slave) and with a kiss of greeting, and with an anointing with oil. When we go to a dinner party we do not expect the host to pour perfumed fat on our head but that was considered a proper way to honor a guest. Think of the picture of the banquet in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm where the cup is overflowing and the head anointed with oil. Jesus then tells the woman that her sins are forgiven, that it was her faith which has saved her! The Pharisees have a lot to wonder about now. Who is this who forgives sins? Isn't that God's prerogative?

I see several lessons here. (1.) Human beings are the instruments God uses to forgive the sins of those who are willing to risk loving. You and I can always be more forgiving and loving. (2.) We can also understand the true nature of hospitality. Not only is it right and proper to be good hosts, I know that many of you are such good hosts because I have been the recipient of wonderful welcome and hospitality in my time among you, but it is right and proper for us to extend that hospitality to those who cannot reciprocate. We

do a good deal of that through our Outreach and benevolence and through providing a place for many good programs to take place.

Hospitality is never something, which can be done and forgotten, or taken for granted. Just as *Xenia* implied continued guest-host relationship, a relationship of mutual respect and care which could be passed down to descendants, so in our larger society we have reason to look for ways to welcome strangers, (*Xenos in Greek means foreigner*) and to integrate immigrants and folks from diverse backgrounds into in our church, our community, and our nation. We are, after all, sisters and brothers in the LORD whatever language we speak or god we worship. At a time when we are tempted to fearfully cover over the Statue of Liberty and stop welcoming the poor and oppressed to our shores, when we are tempted to project our power to other lands to organize them in accordance with our ideals, we might well look at these reminders of the humility and love that lies at the heart of true hospitality.