

The Future of the Church in North America

Part 2: Gracious Guests

Luke 10:1-11

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One of the most remarkable events I attended when I was director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches was a day of dialogue on a September 11th anniversary, when 250 Christians and Muslims met at the Islamic Society of Milwaukee for a unique 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?”

The Muslim leaders from the Islamic Society of Milwaukee were our hosts for this all-day workshop, offering their facilities, welcoming us as new friends, feeding us a Middle Eastern lunch, and 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. A carload of Lutherans from Northern Wisconsin told me they drove four hours to this workshop because that they had never had a conversation with a Muslim. None of us had ever visited the Salaam School, the Muslim elementary school in Milwaukee, where we met.

The whole experience was 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, serving others.

In fact, we take it for granted that being the gracious host is central to our identity as Christians. Usually when we talk about reaching out to the community with some new ministry, it is usually with the expectation that coming to our building would be involved, where we can be the gracious hosts.

What does it now mean for us to be gracious *guests*? If exile is the appropriate metaphor for understanding the place of the Christian Church in our new cultural context—as we discussed last week—and if we are to seek the welfare of the city where we reside, as Jeremiah suggests, then what does ministry look like for 21st century Christians? Becoming gracious guests, I believe, is key to figuring that out.

Incidentally, 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. But 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 the nascent Christian movement would overshadow Judaism. Those expectations had failed to come about.

Similar to the exiles in Babylon we met in last week’s sermon, little Gentile house churches dotting the Roman Empire at the end of the first century 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 now?” 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 the 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 the church 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 the church or the Christian faith, and enter the stories and narratives of those strangers...because somewhere in those stories are the clues to what God is up to in the world today and what it means to be the church.

And, Jesus says, as you head out the door, “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.” Most of us spend a lot of time and effort to avoid this kind of vulnerability. We take our cell phones everywhere so that help is just a phone call away. We live in the suburbs, where it’s safer than in the city. We buy alarm systems for our cars and our houses.

We plan our finances, so we’ll have what we need. As a nation, we use our collective wealth to try to make ourselves safe. Jesus sends his disciples out with empty hands. No money, no weapons to protect themselves.

Go on your way, he tells us today. Leave behind your fears. Your obsession with security. Your delusions of control, your preconceptions of what ministry should look like. Jesus sends the seventy out with no way to take care of themselves. Instead, he tells them to enter the homes of strangers, wish them peace, and hope they get an invitation to dinner and a couch to sleep on.

Carry no purse, no bag. Leave behind your pride and ask for what you need for God’s work. Be good house guests. “Eat what is set before you.” Leave behind your rigid habits, your self-indulgence.

He encourages them to accept what is offered without embarrassment. “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide...” Leave behind your shame about dependence, your insecurity about what you have to offer.

He prepares them for rejection. Some people will welcome them, some won’t. Either way, their job is the same: announce that the kingdom is near. Leave behind your need for approval, your dependence on results.

Sent out empty-handed, they find they get what they need along the way, relying on the hospitality of strangers. They don’t meet people as benefactors, patrons, liberators, or experts. They come into town with hands outstretched, asking for help, and offering peace and healing.

Becoming gracious guests 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. Being gracious guests 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 oversaw the hospitality.

Dan Kimball is a twenty-something pastor helping to launch a new 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 developed friendships with a group 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 for certain segments of American Christianity which are married to a particular political party. Pastor Dan's conversations soon became a ministry of apology.

We know that an 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 space for dialogue with the strangers we meet.

Apology, I suspect, will be a necessary part of the conversation as we move out beyond our walls to become the gracious guests of the LGBTQ 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."

When I was director of the Council of Churches, the Lutheran Synod here in Madison had a dynamic young pastor who was an award-winning master brewer. Truth be told, he was running a microbrewery out of the church parsonage. Only in Wisconsin, right? He was never at a loss for house guests! His vision was to leave the traditional form of parish ministry and open a small brewery on East Washington Ave that would not only sell food and drink to generate income, but also become the base for reaching out as a gracious guest, for community building, for developing new forms of ministry in partnership with others. In essence, the brewery would become a new kind of Christian community where young adults naturally congregate, a new kind of church, if you will. And in Wisconsin, where beer is one of the four food groups, it just might work.

The most important word in our text is "go." Not, come to our church, but go to where people live and work and play, to find acceptance and community. And those places are called Burn Camp, or Cross-Fit, or Planet Fitness, or if you have some disposable income, the Princeton Club, and there are many other settings where young adults congregate in this city that are not traditional churches. Might those kinds of settings become forms of Christian ministry and witness? Might they develop into a new form of church in the late 21st century?

This is the model of ministry of Pres House on the UW campus. A five-story student housing facility, built on its church parking lot, provides a stable form of income for Pres House to reach out to the campus community, engaging over 1,000 students in various forms of ministry last year.

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 seventy 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, as many of us have discovered in post-Christian Madison, not everyone we meet will welcome us. There will be new skills to learn. There will be difficulty and setbacks. There will be enormous resistance from some inside the church from folks who are oh, so comfortable waiting for the world to enter our doors and receive our hospitality.

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. 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 you and me out beyond these walls to join him in that work.

Amen.