

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas  
St. Margaret's Church  
Proper 9, Pentecost C  
July 8, 2007

*Lord make us servants of you peace, your reconciliation, and your welcome.  
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.*

Two years ago I visited New York City, always a culture shock for this southern boy. I was by myself and didn't really know where my hotel was much less how to get there. I was anxious about finding my way. Luckily my cab driver knew the hotel. I was there for "Reinventing Church," a continuing education conference that began on a Sunday morning at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on Park Avenue, next to the Waldorf Astoria. It's quite an amazing place, though I don't think they have much on St. Margaret's, besides a little bit of money.

You see, their annual budget is \$8.5 million dollars! Can you imagine? The place is huge, but not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. Again I didn't know of anyone attending this conference, so I wasn't sure if I was going to have much fun or if I would even be noticed. But when I walked up the steps to the 9 am service, I was greeted by a host of their 5 priests, wardens, vestry members, and ushers. They all stand out on the front steps every Sunday so that walking in to church is like arriving home, a family reunion. I knew right then and there that these were going to be an amazing few days.

The radical welcome continued. The worship and music were extraordinary. The speakers were challenging. We went into the auditorium for the rector's forum between services, and it was packed. There weren't enough chairs. Then I noticed this guy walking around in a dark suit, with perfectly fixed hair. He looked like he would fit in with the mafia. I kept my eye on him and saw him holding up his wrist a lot. I thought to myself, 'What is wrong with this man?' Then I figured out that he was the head professional usher! He was talking into a little microphone in the cuff of his shirt and hearing things through a secret service earpiece. The chairs appeared miraculously. I guess that's what 8.5 million dollars a year can buy for you! St. Bart's is committed to a radical welcome of all who come in to their building, regardless of your background, or your beliefs. It felt so good.

At some point in all of our lives we have been on a journey to a new place, a new job, a new church, a new city, wondering if we will find a welcome there. We worry if we will be accepted just as we are. What are the expectations the other will carry? Will we fulfill those expectations? From time to time we can be overwhelmed, anxious about how other people will receive us.

This morning we hear Jesus calling the seventy and sending them forth into the unknown. He tells them not to take anything that usually makes them comfortable. He sends them knocking on doors, to share the good news of God in Christ. To heal the sick, preach the word, raise the dead, and cast out demons. The disciples hadn't had any seminary training. There was no book entitled "Casting out Demons for Dummies." They had no parish nurse to teach them first aid or CPR in order to raise the dead.

What if they were rejected? What if they failed?

Jesus tells them not to worry. Offer them your best. Show them your peace and the peace of Christ. If they don't offer you radical hospitality and invite you in for a cup of tea, just shake the dust off of your feet and move on to the next house. Easy for him to say.

He goes further though, and says that any town or house that does not offer a welcome will suffer the harshest of punishments, even worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. Why does Jesus bring that up again? Well, “Because they are the archetypal image of the town that failed to offer hospitality to the stranger.”<sup>i</sup>

“In our day hospitality is either an industry, or something that we offer to friends and those we need to impress. It is not something we would usually go out of our way to offer to strangers.”<sup>iii</sup> I mean, when was the last time you opened the door to find the Jehovah’s Witnesses at your door and truly welcomed them in with the love of Christ? When was the last time you talked to the telemarketer or fundraiser on the phone for more than 3 seconds? We are scared, or selfish, or simply lazy.

What would the world be like if we were all as eager as Jesus to offer true Christian hospitality to one another? What if, instead of looking at the stranger in our neighborhood as a potential criminal or threat to our safety, we looked at them as messengers of God? Perhaps that person has something to tell us, maybe even something we need to hear.

I’ve just returned from a short vacation to Canada, visiting St. John, New Brunswick and Halifax, Nova Scotia. We didn’t have enough time in each of the beautiful port towns, but we did make it a point to visit each of the Anglican Churches there.

In St. John, we climbed a hill to see Trinity Church. It is a beautiful early English Gothic structure dating to 1879, as the previous structure was destroyed in the Great Fire of St. John in 1877. As we walked up the steps to the beautiful glass doors we were immediately met with radical hospitality. A guide was prepared to take us on a tour of the church with as much detail as we wanted. We felt like we had been welcomed home, even in a different country. There were the acolyte and Sunday School bulletin boards, the flower chart, a box for food pantry donations, last Sunday’s bulletins and a history display. We felt like we were at home! There was even a Sunday School paper maché replica of Sammy, the six foot fish weathervane that sits atop the gothic steeple. Interesting that from the welcome at the steps to the Christian symbol of the fish on the weathervane, we were enveloped with hospitality.

In Halifax we visited St. Paul’s Anglican Church. Once again we were met at the red doors by a tour guide ready to show us their church home. But we were especially impressed with the sign hanging from the church that said, “Free lunch with the Rector every Wednesday at noon.” Unfortunately it was Tuesday and we missed the free meal. But what an invitation. What a symbol of radical Christian hospitality. The people of St. Paul’s had heard the gospel this morning. They are living it out. We felt at home, and united with our Anglican brothers and sisters in Canada.

The hospitality that we experienced was the very hospitality of Jesus Christ that we taste every week here at this table. That hospitality embraces those we love and agree with, and it embraces the stranger. Not just the stranger though, even our enemies. Jesus was willing to offer his own life to ensure that we know the extent of his love for us and his welcome extended to us. He could have given up and saved his life, but he kept on going.

“This is the pattern for our call to hospitality too.”<sup>iiii</sup> We are called to first meet the stranger on our steps with the peace of Christ in our hearts. What if we offered that peace as part of our evangelism, a radical welcome? If we are supposed to keep going, then we will receive that welcome back 10 fold. But first we must be open to that welcome. We must accept that love of Christ without reservation, expectation or restraint. It may not be easy, but in offering that radical welcome, and in waiting for it to return, we might just receive a message from God.

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<sup>i</sup> God’s Hospitality  
A sermon on Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7; Matthew 9:35-10:23 & Romans 5: 1-8

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by Nathan Nettleton, 13 June 1999

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<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*