

"Putting Out the Welcome Mat"

II Kings 4:8-10; Luke 10:38-42

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 12, 2017 – 23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Some people don't venture very far from home in their lifetime. And that's fine. No one says you need to. Then there's also folks who are constantly on the go... here today and there tomorrow. Life is filled with both kinds of people. And we see both types in our scriptures today.

The prophet Elisha was one of those frequent travelers. In fact, he passed through one town so often that a couple there took pity on him and even altered their house to accommodate his visits.

The text relates that "One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, 'Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small chamber and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.'"

Sounds like the furnishings of an ancient Holiday Inn! This was certainly hospitality above and beyond what would normally be expected. In this home Elisha was welcomed as if he were family, a great honor in that society. In this particular household it seems he had a permanent place at the table.

Jesus also seemed to have a ready room waiting for him whenever he passed through the village of Bethany. It was in the home of the sisters Mary and Martha. Our reading today tells of one instance where they received Jesus into their house. On that particular occasion Mary sat at Jesus' feet as he taught while Martha was scurrying around trying to straighten up and prepare a meal. I'm sure Jesus' gentle rebuke of Martha was not made so much critically as it was out of concern.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better way, which will not be taken away from her." Jesus' words are a caution for Martha, concern that she not let ordinary preparations distract her from things more important.

These two stories show us how the hosts addressed the needs of Elisha and Jesus, yet—in return—they were also served by their guests. Caring went both ways. Through something as basic as hospitality, these generous families provided an invaluable gift. The men slept and ate in places where they were not only received, but loved. These houses were more than just convenient places to stay, but really second homes for them. Jesus and Elisha found that the welcome mat was always out .

Move with me now to a time closer to today. When a lady by the name of Sudie Black died she was mourned by scores of people, many of whom didn't even know her last name. She had lived in a small apartment over a Washington drugstore for more than 35 years. By most

standards it was a very modest place, but one that always had an open door to others. No one was ever a stranger, at least not for long.

As word quickly spread about her death, people she had befriended began to return to the neighborhood. One successful businessman recalled the day when he arrived in Washington with only a single dollar in his pocket. He was 19 then and first met Sudie when they struck up a conversation on the way into a diner. After talking for a while she offered to pay for his meal so that he could use that dollar to start his new life. Whether it was the dollar or the confidence she helped to instill in him, this was his first big step on making good in life.

Another man told of the time Sudie had gathered a group of young people and took them to a farm to pick strawberries. When they returned to the city they were exhausted, but Sudie was still full of energy. Before she went to bed she made each of them a small pie from their own berries. He recalled it was the first pie that he ever had that was his very own.

As people gathered in front of the drugstore they told more stories about things she had done for them: about her help with jobs, or transportation, or a place to live. The stories were as varied as they were.

A restaurant owner recalled the time when she pitched in as a waitress on a holiday because he was short-handed. Another, who was now president of a construction company, told how she had taken him under her wing shortly after arriving from Greece. An attorney told how she had gone with him when he was looking for his first apartment. And the stories went on and on.

Sudie Black, who spent time caring for the people of her neighborhood, would have been surprised by how many still remembered the little favors she had done for them. A humble, sincere person, she only did what seemed right at the time. She truly lived by those words of Jesus: "As you do unto the least of these, you do for me."

Christ was indeed well-served by this unassuming woman. Her example reminds us that Jesus linked our good to the good of others. We are not to separate ourselves from the world, but to enter actively into life and to engage with our neighbors. You can't love God, he said, unless you learn to love those around you. You can't do one, and not the other.

The Shumenite couple sensed Elisha's needs and responded to him directly. Martha and Mary knew that Jesus longed for a place of rest that he could always count on. They provided that very thing. The hosts in these two accounts didn't ask for any rewards; but because their hospitality was genuine, they were given much in return.

We may not be able to add a wing on to our house or, realistically, even make space for another person to move in, but that doesn't mean that the door of welcome is closed. Christ's kind of radical hospitality begins by first opening our hearts to others. It starts by welcoming people into our world. Not because of what they can do for us, but because this is what discipleship is about.

Jesus encourages us to show an enthusiasm for other lives as well as our own, to see that their welfare and our welfare are intrinsically linked. Now that's something we may have to grow into, to learn how to do. The more we practice it, though, the easier and more natural it

becomes. It's just the opposite of the rising notion today that the whole world should revolve around me.

Time and again we're presented with opportunities to be of help and support to others. We're given the chance almost every day to show how we can be there in responsive ways. In a sense you might say that this is a test of how real our love for God actually is. It's easy to talk a good game but, the truth is, we also have to show evidence of our faith. This is what separates the devoted from those who only posture their concern.

In a biography of Mother Teresa, Malcolm Muggeridge recalled the time when he took her and another sister to a train station in Calcutta. "It was very early," he writes, "and the streets were full of sleeping figures; sleeping with that strange, poignant abandon of India's homeless poor.

"We drove up to the station, absurdly enough, in a large American limousine which happened to be at my disposal. The porters rushed expectantly forward when I got out followed by two nuns... carrying... only a basket of provisions, most of which, I well knew, would be distributed along the way. I saw them to the train and settled them into a third-class compartment. Mother Teresa has a pass on the Indian railways given her by the government [to support her work..]"

Muggeridge then goes on to say that she would have liked an airline pass, too, and that she even tried to work out an arrangement for free travel to save money for her order. She offered that she could work as a stewardess on her flights in exchange for a ticket.

My guess is that Teresa would have made a great flight attendant. I certainly would have been totally comfortable in her care, and that's from a person who doesn't like to fly. She was one of those persons whose heart was truly bigger than she was.

More often than not, what we're called upon to give to others are little things, but little favors done generously. Sometimes a person lacks something small, but significant: a ride to the grocery store, help with yard work, a babysitter for a few hours, an ear to listen. Maybe all they need is a smile, but it's ours to give or withhold.

Clearly the way of life set out for a Christian is the servant model shown us by Jesus. There's a good feeling in knowing that someone else's day is a little better because we cared enough to be part of it, that you or we gave something of ourselves to benefit them. To love another in this way—a friend, a neighbor, even a stranger—is central to our faith. Not optional you understand, but absolutely essential.

To meet people where they are through caring and acceptance is truly to meet Jesus in his need. When we have a hospitality of the heart, then we not only declare our faith but we live it every day.