



## A PASTORAL LETTER

January, 2006

### Dynamic Hospitality, Homosexuality and the Gospel

Good Friends,

Hospitality has been long understood as an essential obligation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As far back as the story of Abraham recounted in the book of Genesis, the biblical witness has revealed that the people of God extend themselves to the stranger and open their homes to the traveler. Indeed, the very lives of ancient nomadic desert people depended upon their willingness to extend hospitality. The author of Hebrews would later instruct the followers of Jesus, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Abraham and Sarah received three such travelers who, unbeknownst to them, were revealed as messengers from God who brought with them a great blessing.

For Christians, this ancient idea of hospitality fully matured as a robust application of the teachings of Jesus, summarized within his commandment that we find inscribed in our apse mosaics: "Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Following the resurrection, the disciples struggled with understanding the limits of this love. Was it to extend only to the descendants of Abraham? Or, as radical as it seemed, could it possibly extend to any and all who desired to live by faith through God's grace as revealed in Christ Jesus?

Early on, the Spirit's wisdom inspired a dynamic response to this most truthful way of living from the widest possible audience. Thus, as recounted in Matthew in our beloved stories of the birth in Bethlehem, another set of three strangers from distant lands and of alien religion traveled east to pay homage to a little child. They were not restricted by the parochialism of their own geography and culture from seeing the truth in this birth. Jesus was a citizen of, and a king for, the whole world. He would grow into a man of the rarest spiritual power who confounded the religious leaders of his day. Routinely he was accused of associating with every sort of outcast and misfit, and he frequently disregarded religious practice that constricted the range of God's loving, saving grace. Jesus meant to change that. And this brought him to the cross.

This was the reason that Paul's passionate plea for the inclusion of all gentiles was eventually embraced by the disciples. Paul was at his best when he wrote the now beloved words concerning "the more excellent way" of love, which conclude with this proclamation: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is love." The relentless logic of this love pressed out to the farthest margins the understanding of hospitality in God's kingdom.

Elsewhere in the epistles we read that "[Christ] has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new humanity..." And, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

This amazing, radical redefinition of what it meant to be among God's elect became the solid rock beneath the foundation of the church that the Spirit brought to life. This dynamic hospitality came to characterize the early church. Nothing could exclude one from God's embrace if one chose to receive it. The offer of love was without qualification. Thank God!

One does not need to be an historical scholar to know that over the centuries the church has imperfectly practiced this love, even as it continued to teach it. The church is, in part, a human institution and as such embodies the virtue it proclaims only in proportion to the applied intentions of its members. And, of course, human intentions, even human Christian intentions, are often fickle, fraught with our propensity towards fear and arrogance. The thing that saves us from ourselves is God's unrelenting love for us, God's hospitality, which has the doors of God's house flung wide in anticipation of our several homecomings.

As the church has struggled forward through the centuries, negotiating the intersections of scripture, tradition, experience and reason, it has come to discover and affirm that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the heavenly system, that slavery is not divinely ordained, and that women are most certainly not property. But these battles were fought fiercely for generations before an enlightened understanding emerged at the crossroads of faith's engagement with an accumulating body of knowledge.

Christianity has always been at its best when advancing God's radical word of grace, God's hospitality. This is the engine that builds homes, schools and hospitals, and grounds the hope of second, third and fourth chances at life. When asked how often we should forgive, Jesus' response was not seven times, but seventy times seven times - in other words, forgiveness unlimited! This astounding word of grace is nearly more than we can conceptualize. Still, to be followers of Jesus is to allow ourselves to be captured by a love that is larger than our own.

This grace lies behind the mission of Christ Church: We seek to love God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves. And this grace informs our four core values: worship is the core of our life; we live and practice dynamic hospitality; we welcome and affirm diversity; we strive for excellence in all we do. These precepts guide our life together and focus our work in the world.

It is this grace - this gospel hospitality - that confirms my confidence that homosexual persons are welcome at God's table. In their givenness, in their innate humanity, I believe they, no less than all others, are received joyfully, lovingly by their creating, saving God. How could it be otherwise? A church that refuses them entrance commits sin. Period. A church that doesn't affirm their journey to wholeness and completeness in covenant love, commits sin. Period. By sin I mean placing a stumbling block along their pathway to God. When the church closes its doors to some on the basis of their essential humanity, it diminishes its glory. Surely Jesus demonstrated this with the content of his life (and death).

For these reasons, I stand in opposition to our denomination's current conflicted position on the status of homosexual persons, recently the subject of several news accounts. Until we dignify homosexual persons with our full acceptance as sisters and brothers possessing a common spiritual genetics, we have little to share with them that bespeaks the astonishing scope of God's extravagant love. In the process we deny their gifts for the upbuilding of the kingdom and miss the opportunity for the expansion of our own capacity to love. This is an unacceptable and ultimately untenable situation since the church is at war with itself and its highest aspirations.

Throughout Christendom the church groans under the weight of this contradiction of grace and exclusion. The United Methodist Church is but one fragment of the whole, but it is our fragment, our family, our responsibility. Every four years, representatives gather to consider the content of our shared discipline. 2008 presents us with the next opportunity to address this crucial issue and effect church-wide reformation. It is my hope that, by the end of 2007, Christ Church will have found its collective voice and be able to advance a petition to the General Conference on issues pertaining to homosexuality that will express our vision of a church that strives to live the

dynamic hospitality it finds in the life and teachings of Jesus. Be attentive to opportunities to engage this conversation over the ensuing months. (For more information on the church's position and several excellent resources, please contact the church office.)

I am aware that not everyone will share my opinion as stated here. Still, I feel it is necessary for you to understand my heart on this matter. Not long ago I was asked if someone would be welcomed into our congregation who currently could not quite agree with me. My response was "Most certainly!" But I thought it best the person understand my position and where I thought Christ Church was headed.

As we continue to mature as a congregation, it is important for me to send a word of comfort, hope and challenge, a pastoral word, to help define the nature of our family of faith at this particular moment and to identify part of our shared work. For, make no mistake, living this sort of radical love is hard work. This is no sentimental task; the crucifixion is evidence enough of that. It remains for us to reflect deeply upon scripture, the historic tradition that has been passed on to us, and our own experience of God's saving activity to determine the contours of this love we claim is the source of life itself.

We know that everything we can do in our freedom born from grace is not necessarily edifying or holy. Love derives its meaning in a crucible of self-discipline and freedom, of sacrifice and joy, and an unyielding commitment to matters of integrity, human dignity, compassion, courage, perseverance, fidelity and hope. We will not always agree - that is an aspect of the limitations of our humanity. On the other hand, if we remain vigilant in our commitment to dynamic hospitality and the rigorous nature of the sort of love Jesus taught about and lived, we have every reason to believe God will greatly bless our intention and cause us to rise above our own fear and arrogance. In the First Letter of John we read, "Perfect love casts out all fear." Would that our own love could be so large.

The New Year is upon us, presenting us with unprecedented opportunity to advance God's cause. We have been blessed with vitality, financial means, manifold talents, warm hearts, generous spirits. We have gifted musicians to help us worship, committed sisters and brothers to help us extend our hospitality to other parts of our city, nation and world. We have persons who yearn to deepen their understanding of and relationship with God and persons willing to serve wherever need arises. In short, we have all the necessary ingredients for a healthy, growing and dynamic ministry. May this fully manifest in 2006.

This letter is attended by an ever-deepening love for the members of this family and a growing appreciation of the scope of our task, situated as we are in the heart of the city at the heart of the world. There is no question that, if we so choose, we can become a leadership institution for our city and for our denomination, and God may be so calling us. There is no question that, in God, all things are possible. Together, listening deeply for God's voice speaking in our midst, through all the angels gathered here, we will discover our true purpose.

With great affection and through the peace of Christ,



The Reverend Stephen P. Bauman  
Senior Minister