

"Holy Hospitality"  
Proverbs 9:1-6  
By: Lisa W. Davison  
June 16, 2023  
Disciples Christian Church  
Bartlesville, OK

She worked from sun-up to sundown for days – cleaning and decorating the house. She cooked all her best recipes to prepare for the feast – there was mashed potatoes, fried chicken, green beans, corn, and desserts galore. She sent out the invitations to everyone in town – all are welcome, ya'll come; just as she was taking the homemade bread out of the oven, the guests started to arrive. The aromas caused their mouths to water; each one tempted to stick a finger in the bowl or sneak a crumb from the bread. They gathered around the tables she had set with her best china. Sitting in a collection of chairs as diverse as the people who sat upon them. When she finally brought her plate to the table, she paused to observe the tableau before her: people from all walks of life, some in their Sunday best clothes and others dressed in clothes that were well worn and threadbare in places. The doctor next to the janitor, the lawyer next to the parolee, the maid next to the woman who paid her salary. There was no head of the table, so no one had a special place. All were honored guests. The laughter was music to her ears, and everyone ate and drank their fill. It was the best meal anyone could ever remember.

What is "hospitality"? We hear the word used a great deal; it is even an industry; you can get a degree in Hospitality management. Where I come from, we brag about "southern hospitality" – a glass of iced tea (sweet of course) and a snack; or

lemonade for those like me who don't drink iced tea. But what do we mean by "hospitality"?

- Making Someone Feel at home
- Provide lodging/food/etc.
- Welcoming others
- Friendliness
- Graciousness
- Courtesy

According to theologian Letty Russell: "Hospitality is an expression of unity without uniformity. Hospitality creates a safe and welcoming space for persons to find their own sense of humanity and worth."<sup>1</sup>

Hospitality customs were a vital part of the culture in the ancient near east. The people followed these codes of conduct with great formality, understanding them as sacred. The environment of the desert and the arid land in most of what we know as the Middle East is harsh. For one traveling through that area, having access to water and food was a matter of life and death. Also, they needed a safe place to spend the night, because there were those who would seek to harm strangers, and there were no Motel 6s leaving the light on for you. Without the hospitality of strangers, a traveler could die. When one invited a guest into their home, the host was required to provide that person with 3 things: food, water, and lodging. By accepting the guests, especially in providing them food and sharing that food with them, the host also took on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, Westminster John Knox, 1993, 173-74

obligation of protecting them. Thus, the host was considered responsible for any harm that came to the guest while residing under the host's roof.

In the biblical understanding, hospitality is an obligation not a courtesy. According to the texts, most of all our faith ancestors were wanderers, who did not have a homeland and who relied on the hospitality of others for their survival. In the Hebrew Bible, there are examples of great hospitality: Abraham & Sarah unknowingly hosting divine guests, Rebecca going the extra mile of offering sustenance and safety not only to the servant of Abraham but also to his entourage and animals; the Shunnamite Woman who built a special room in her home for the prophet Elijah whenever he passed through town. Lest anyone forget the sacred task of hospitality, Israel's prophets would remind them how serious it was to fail to observe the regulations for hospitality – naming it as a very serious sin. The hospitality of the Holy is also portrayed throughout texts: in the Genesis Creation stories, the Divine provides food and protection both for animals & humans, and in Ps 23 the Holy one “prepares a table in the presence of” the psalmist's enemies. The post exilic prophetic voice found in Isa 58 describes a feast provided by the Divine that includes the best food and drink one could imagine.

In the passage from Prov 9:1-6 we find yet another example of hospitality in Woman Wisdom. In these six verses, the author portrays the epitome of a good host. She is the host with the most, if you will. Woman Wisdom fulfills multiple roles, in addition to host. She is a teacher, builder, and nurturer.<sup>2</sup> She creates a large enough

---

<sup>2</sup> Ho, Shirley S.. "Making Wise the Stranger: Sapiential Hospitality in Proverbs 1–9" *Open Theology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2021, pp. 611-625. <https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2020-0183>

safe space, a home with 7 pillars, so there's room at the table for everyone. Hers is a place where a variety of opinions can be shared in a common pursuit of the wisdom that leads to a life in which all can not only be nourished but also flourish.

Woman Wisdom's hospitality is proactive.<sup>3</sup> She does not sit at home waiting for someone to happen upon her place. Woman Wisdom issues invitations and even goes out into the streets to invite all who pass by to come and eat and find life. It is an invitation to drink from the Divine fountain of wisdom. Woman Wisdom's hospitality is reflected in her willingness to empower others to succeed. "She has a 'home court' advantage, she possesses the historical, cultural, and social knowledge and experience"<sup>4</sup> that is invaluable for those on life's journey who accept her invitation to this feast. Divine Wisdom is having a dinner party and everyone is invited, even you and me.

Woman Wisdom offers Divine radical and extravagant hospitality: food for body and mind; drink for thirst as well as for wisdom and acceptance; safety from physical and emotional danger. We who have experienced her hospitality are called to do the same. But how does the church embody this radical, extravagant hospitality? First, we need to be certain that our invitation to the feast **really is** for everyone. Are there potential guests with whom we would rather not share a meal? Woman Wisdom says invite them first! Are we afraid that we won't have enough food or love to go around?

---

<sup>3</sup> Ho, Shirley S.. "Making Wise the Stranger: Sapiential Hospitality in Proverbs 1–9" *Open Theology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2021, pp. 611-625. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0183>

<sup>4</sup> Ho, Shirley S.. "Making Wise the Stranger: Sapiential Hospitality in Proverbs 1–9" *Open Theology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2021, pp. 611-625. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0183>

Woman Wisdom teaches us that with the Holy there are no limits. Just when we think there's no more room, the Divine pulls up a few more chairs, and everyone sits a little closer. Perhaps, when we sit around tables, acknowledging that each person has a small slice of God's wisdom, authentic Wisdom can be experienced.<sup>5</sup> As Shirley Ho states: "In the face of our culture's increasing individualism and xenophobia, sharing a meal with a stranger is subversive."<sup>6</sup> Yet that's what Woman Wisdom calls us to do.

Woman Wisdom challenges us to embody the radical, extravagant hospitality of the Holy, inviting people to a banquet of love, to get better acquainted with who they are as a reflection of the Holy and to find unexpected companionship with the diversity of guests. We must go out and extend this same hospitality and offer sustenance to those who need it most. Those who are unsafe in our society because of their appearance, their differing abilities, whom they love, and how they worship, or any other human-created divisions in Holy's family.

We are called to welcome all of the Holy's people by providing opportunities to nurture the Divine image in them and to recognize that image in all people. Empowering them to trust that they are truly loved. As you already know, it will not always be popular to embody this radical Divine Hospitality and to call people to a life filled with Divine Wisdom. There are plenty of people who think they can control the Divine, limiting the Holy Hospitality to only those they deem acceptable as if the Divine's love is in limited supply. The very idea that the Divine's love extends beyond

---

<sup>5</sup> "Holy Wisdom: A Sermon on Proverbs 9:1-6"

<http://magdalenesmusings.blogspot.com/2009/08/holy-wisdom-sermon-on-roverbs-91-6.html>

<sup>6</sup> Ho, "Making Wise the Stranger."

their human-created barriers makes them uncomfortable or even angry. Acting as the messengers of Divine Wisdom's invitation, we can sure of one thing: the Holy is with us every step of the way. Amen.