

Can I buy you a cup of coffee?
June 13, 2010 – Rev. Jim Cullen

When someone says to you, “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?” what does it really mean? I enjoy your company. I want to tell you something. I want to ask you something. We need to sit down and solve a problem. We need to plan for something. Think about it. We may not even want a cup of coffee. It has become a code phrase for an excuse to get together. It is so much more comfortable than just saying “we need to talk”.

There are many ways we try to connect with others. We plan the “what to do” so that we have an obvious reason to get together. People invite others for dinner or drinks, or some form of hospitality. We do this in church all the time. A congregation thrives when there are opportunities to share food together. It certainly is my history of our church. We have coffee time, snacks after meetings, potluck dinners. Today I would like to reflect on where hospitality fits in our personal life and our church life.

Perhaps we can learn from the story from the gospel this morning. Jesus is invited to dinner at Simon’s house. Now Simon is not a fan of Jesus. It may be that this invitation to dinner is a bit of a trap, just to see what Jesus would do and how he would act. The woman in the story had a bad reputation, at least according to Simon.

While dinner is taking place the woman enters from behind the couches. This was not unusual because the poor and needy often hung around dinner parties hoping to get some assistance from one or more guests. She obviously not only knew Jesus but was responding in appreciation for what he had done for her in the past. She is very emotional, unable to speak. She cries and only touches Jesus’ feet. It is then the true side of Simon comes out. He remarks that if Jesus was a true prophet he would know what kind of woman this was. By this time the conversation around the table would be strained. Other guests would be wondering what was going to be said next.

Jesus says to Simon that he has something to say to him. Jesus then tells the story of two men in debt. One has a small debt, the other a much larger one. So if the debts are forgiven who will be most grateful? Simon replies, *I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.* By now Jesus has reclaimed the conversation.

It is then that Jesus lists the ways that Simon was not a very good host. He says that Simon offered him no water to wash his feet but this woman washed them with her tears. Simon offered no kiss as a greeting but she kissed his feet. Simon offered no anointing oil but she anointed his feet.

The story is about acceptance and forgiveness. Simon thought he was above all that. The woman knew she needed both. At the end of the story Simon is still the old Simon and the woman is free of her past.

While this is a story about acceptance and forgiveness it is also a reminder that our lives are enriched as we practice hospitality. I recall one congregation I knew said that they had a “ministry of hospitality”. I think that can be said for many of our congregations. From the sharing the bread and wine at communion to our lunches and dinners we do something that brings people together.

We have stories about hospitality. It can take so many forms. I recall years ago, visiting a farm family and they insisted that I stay for supper. The husband grabbed a rifle and went out to the barnyard and shot a chicken, cleaned it and had it ready for the fry pan in minutes. I think this was even faster than the “30 minute meals” on TV.

I recall as a young person being invited to a very nice restaurant in High Park in Toronto. As a country boy, I was not used to so much cutlery and glasses. It was too stressful to really enjoy the dinner.

Hospitality is what is offered and what is received. Its value to us is not dependent upon style or cost but upon the spirit in which it is shared. Hospitality is about sharing time and conversation: listens and learning and demonstration and acceptance. Hospitality means friendly welcoming and the generous treatment offered to guest and strangers.

As a congregation we have an opportunity to practice hospitality when new people attend worship or another event for the first time. It is that first impression that will determine what happens next. New people who worship with us are not visitors. They are our guests and we are the hosts.

Let’s go back to the story. The woman offers to Jesus, her time, her tears, her gratitude and the expensive gift of ointment. In a sense she has become the host. I am sure that Jesus appreciated her graciousness and generosity. But, in her giving, she became the beneficiary. She experienced the joy of giving and giving thanks, the joy of showing how much Jesus meant to her. This experience shows that her life has a new focus. It is in giving that she received. Jesus sees this and acknowledges this saying, “your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Acceptance and forgiveness enable us to broaden our ability to be hospitable. Some of the words from our opening prayer come for a song in More Voices, the supplement to Voices United ... “*Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still. Let this be our song no one stands alone, standing side by side.*” Let us go from here this morning knowing that “*we are part of God’s family. We are lost and we are found and we are a part of the family.*”