

Sermon Transcript

“Are You On Philoxenia?”

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November 5, 2006

The summer after I graduated college, a friend and I traveled through Europe. Late one night, we arrived by train in Genoa, Italy. A fellow traveler had given us scribbled directions to a recommended hostel. We boarded a bus near the train station and even though we knew the name of the street we needed to stop at, it was dark out and impossible to read anything. The bus was full of elderly women, and to make matters worse, the lights kept flickering on and off. We gripped our backpacks, remembering the warnings we'd heard about traveling after dark. The city lights disappeared behind us, as we stared out the windows, now certain we'd missed our stop.

Suddenly, the old ladies on the bus started yelling in Italian. The bus lurched to a stop. The women began pulling at our backpacks – pushing us toward the front of the bus. My friend and I looked at each other, terrified! But these ladies weren't trying to harm us! They knew this was our stop! They wanted us to get off. “Gratzi,” we said. “Gratzi.”

As I think back on this trip, I realize that these women had been on philoxenia. So had the woman at the English bed and breakfast, who surprised us with the gift of an extravagantly packed lunch for our day of travels. And there was the old Austrian man who bought us a round of drinks. All of them had been on philoxenia.

Now - maybe you're thinking philoxenia is some sort of new drug by Merck. Or that it has something to do with “Dr. Phil” and his talk show. Or maybe you've never heard of the word. But you've heard of philosophy, which means “love of wisdom” (philo, love, and Sophia, wisdom). And Philadelphia – Philos: Love; Adelphos – brother: City of Brotherly love.

You know that a phobia is a fear of something.

If you had ecclesiophobia, for example, you wouldn't be here, because you'd have a fear of church. If you had xenophobia, you'd have a fear of "Xena, Princess Warrior." Actually, if you had xenophobia, you'd have a fear of strangers, because xeno means stranger.

Thus, philoxenia is the love of strangers. It's a Greek word that appears in the Christian Scriptures. It means hospitality – hospitality as a spiritual gift, but also as a spiritual practice. This idea of hospitality, of welcoming the stranger, is deeply embedded in the Bible. Jesus taught that it's in the space between the stranger and you that the divine might be encountered.

Depending on his listener's understanding of the nature of the divine, Jesus puts forth his vision of radical hospitality: "When I was thirsty, you gave me water; when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me." And I would add: "When I was lost, you got me off the bus to the hostel."

The Bible, as well as Greek mythology, is full of stories about Gods who take human form and test unsuspecting mortals to see how they're welcomed.

Speaking of welcoming, did you know that over the course of the year, our churches have close to a quarter of a million visitors? But as a movement we're not growing! What gives?

It has something to do with hospitality. Remember, philoxenia, love of the stranger, is a spiritual gift, and a spiritual practice. Which means, it takes practice.

You know, Leonardo DiVinci didn't just paint the Mona Lisa with one brush stroke. Lance Armstrong didn't just hop on a bike and say, "I think I'll win the Tour de France this year...maybe next year, too." Britney Spears didn't just become an overnight sensation.

Well, wait, she did. Nevermind.

But most things take practice. The good news is that hospitality can be practiced in a number of ways. One immediate way to practice is to extend a "welcome" to someone new to you in the coffee hour today.

Prayer and meditation is another way to practice hospitality. If you have a prayer or meditative life, try holding space for people different than you, people you dislike, even people you consider your enemies. See what happens when you intentionally make space for these people.

Hospitality can be also practiced with the foreign or strange parts of ourselves. Author Anne Lamott writes:

I've spent days and weeks comparing my body to everyone else's body...

Sometimes my body was better than...

Mostly it was worse-than.

On tropical beaches it was almost always much-worse than, because gravity is having its say and there are lots of teenage girls around...

(Bird by Bird, 206)

But Anne Lamott, through her practice of focusing on the spirit inside the body, discovers a deep fondness for her own body.

It's hard to be hospitable to anyone if we can't first be hospitable with ourselves. So yes - hospitality takes practice. It's worth it, because hospitality allows us to break out of the "cage of the self," to encounter the divine in another.

Philoxenia, the love of the stranger, is the deep realization that you and I belong to one another, are inextricably linked together, like two sides of a zipper. With just half a zipper – pants fall down, jackets fail, and flaps stay open. Strangers, those we least expect, are the other half of the zipper. When we welcome the stranger, we often receive an unexpected gift as well, the richness of their presence and experience.

This sort of radical hospitality is not based on kinship, political leanings, or religious identity. As author Marjory Bankson says, this type of hospitality is a “pattern of care and welcoming based on loyalty to Love and to God (that spirit of love) - rather than to cultural roles and rules.”¹

Thinking back to that bus in Genoa, Italy, it’s clear that those women wanted me to have a positive experience in their city. I felt their care and welcome, their loyalty to love.

As we encounter strangers here and in our lives, may we, too, practice that loyalty to love.

May it be so.

¹ Marjory Zoet Bankson “Who are my sisters and brothers?”