



Hospitality

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Hospitality, as a religious principle, has always mattered. Not only to religious communities greeting their guests, but to the very purpose of religious life. As a posture of open-hearted welcome, hospitality insists that only when we warmly greet the stranger will we be capable of receiving God as well. Or, in another way of putting it, every barrier we raise to keep the “other” at arm’s length will also barricade our hearts against the sacred source of life itself.

In countless stories from wisdom teachings, God arrives disguised as the “other” and only reveals a deeper, sacred identity to those who warmly welcome God unaware. The ones who possess little but share without holding back, who open the door without qualifying questions about merit or identity or even political persuasion – these are the ones who encounter the holy.

So how are we to understand this in the pandemic, when our mounting losses give everything a whiff of scarcity? And when safe practices warn us not to open our arms to one another? How do we welcome anyone “in” — friend, stranger or God, disguised or not — when our mutual wellbeing requires distancing and masking and closing our church buildings? What does hospitality ask of us now?

Perhaps one thing we’re learning about hospitality today, is that it is not always about space.

It can also be about time. Although we must hold back from sharing space with one another, we can still share time — online, by mail, by phone, in front stoop conversations, and visits by window. We might not be able to invite one another into our homes and churches, but we are finding so many other ways to welcome one another into our lives.

This can still be challenging. Well before the pandemic, poet Naomi Shihab Nye pointed out how unusual it can be to let down our guard against requests for our time:

*No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That’s the armor everyone put on
at the end of the century
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.*

For some of us, the pandemic has brought an abundance of free time, so this is a good chance to practice hospitality by sharing that bounty. For others, with children or other loved ones needing care at home or working in demanding frontline jobs, the pandemic has required all the waking hours of each day and then some. How do we practice hospitality when it feels like we have nothing to give?

This is a second learning about hospitality, driven home by the pandemic but important in every time. Hospitality’s generosity has never depended on how much one can spare. It has always been shaped more significantly by a willingness to share whatever is there, bountiful or not.

In the biblical story of Elijah and the ravens and the widow, a long drought has brought fear and famine. God directs the prophet Elijah to go to a brook where he will have water and where ravens will bring him bread and meat each day. When the brook dries up, God sends Elijah on to Zarephath, where he’s told a widow will provide him with food. At the town gate, Elijah meets a widow and asks for a piece of bread. She explains she has only enough flour and oil for a single loaf, which she is preparing to bake as a last meal for herself and her son before they die. Elijah tells her not

to be afraid. Then he asks her to go home and do as she had planned, but to first make him a small loaf before baking another for her and her son. Doing this, he assures the mother, her flour and oil will be replenished by God until God sends rain.

Think about it. There, in the midst of a drought, Elijah first receives hospitality from God and nature, delivered by the brook and the ravens. Then, hospitality comes from a starving mother willing to answer Elijah’s request for his own small loaf of bread despite her scarce supply. And, indeed, when she does, her flour and oil do not run out. She and her son and the prophet are nourished and survive.

Perhaps what hospitality asks of us today, as always, is to notice where a sense of scarcity is locking our hearts down, guarding us from a willingness to share. If we cannot safely open our doors to each other, maybe we are asked to remove our armor of busy-ness and to open our hearts and our days to one another. To show up — on Zoom, on the phone, or on the front lawn. To be present — through the window, in the mail, on social media, in the park. To share what we have — even if it is just this one moment, just this one hour, just this one day.

What a sweet welcome that can be.

By Karen Hering on behalf of this month’s theme team: Drew Danielson, Ray Hommeyer, KP Hong, and Laura Park

Hospitality Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme, a variety of resources including books, poems, video, and audio, are listed in this month’s Chalice Circle packet, online at www.unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html.