

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), renowned American minister, preacher, and philosophical theologian, wrote: “Christian practice is that evidence which confirms every other indication of true Godliness.” Much has been written recently on Christian practices; we are grieving because some of our usual practices have been so disrupted by the pandemic. If we are fortunate, they have their roots in our homes, continue through the careful efforts and encouragement of our churches, our church schools, our youth groups, our campus ministries. These offer content, but even more important, they foster ways of being in the world in relationship to God and to God’s son and in relationships with each other. These practices become so ingrained that it’s almost as if they are part of our DNA; they carry us when we can no longer carry ourselves consciously.

In recent years, many churches have come to describe our mentoring and teaching as Christian formation rather than education. These practices develop a posture that is rooted in gratitude and expectation of God continuing to be at work in the world. They encourage imagination and expectation that God continues to create new life and desires to heal what is sick or broken. They manifest our faith that God loves with an intense love every creature whom God has created and our hope in God’s promise that there is a world to come of which we get sure and certain glimpses even now. They are about believing that nothing is “too wonderful for the Lord.” They are about conforming our lives as best we can to the life of Jesus Christ.

In his book *A Room Called Remember*, Frederick Buechner writes: “Yet they meet as well as diverge, our stories and Christ’s, and even when they diverge, it is *his* they diverge from, so that by his absence as well as by his presence in our lives we know who he is and who we are and who we are not. We have it in us to be Christs to each other and maybe in some unimaginable way to God too – that’s what we have to tell finally. We have it in us to work miracles of love and healing as well as to have them worked upon us. We have it in us to bless with him and forgive with him and heal with him and once in a while maybe even to grieve with some measure of his grief at another’s pain and to rejoice with some measure of his rejoicing at another’s joy almost as if it were our own. And who knows but that in the end, by God’s mercy, the two stories will converge for good and all, and though we would never have had the courage or the faith or the wit to die for him any more than we have ever managed to live for him very well either, his story will come true in us at last.”

In our readings, we have the contrast between lives rooted in Christian practice and lives without. Paul describes those who, through Jesus Christ, actually stand in the peace and grace of God versus those who, like the crowds in Matthew’s gospel, are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, standing in the shifting sands of values that cannot keep them upright. Stories such as the prodigal son and the compassionate father in Luke’s gospel show us that even if we stray, the practices that have become part of us help us to know that we can come home again and find that we have been hoped for and loved when *we* thought our lives were beyond repair.

There are many Christian practices, of course, such as prayer, alms-giving, repentance, going to church, keeping the Sabbath, fasting, telling the truth, stewardship and tithing. When we embody these practices and model them for our children and grandchildren, we live with a sense that the presence of God is near, already at hand, through Jesus Christ – and that this is good news we have to share with others.

Our lessons offer a compelling portrait of hospitality. Indeed, our Old Testament lesson is perhaps the quintessential text. And I would suggest that with all the time we normally spend eating and celebrating together, we may feel we have at least mastered *this* practice fairly well unlike some of the others – until we are suddenly not able to do this. Not being able to offer St. Andrew’s Love Thy Neighborhood dinners, a practice rooted in St. Andrew’s calling to be a hospitable beacon for our surrounding community, has been part of our grief. Many of us tend to think of offering hospitality as applying primarily to friends – and church friends and family, of course --unless our hearts have been opened to something far broader and deeper. In the ancient Near East, the time in which our scriptures were written, hospitality was extended to complete strangers, even enemies.

The Greek New Testament term often translated into the English hospitality is Φιλόξενοϛ. It is a combination of the word *philao* -- one of several words for “love” in Greek, this one used for

brotherly/sisterly love, such as in the name derived from the Greek Philadelphia. The second word is xenos, which means “stranger” or “immigrant.” From this we get the word xenophobia which is the fear of strangers/immigrants. So the Christian understanding and practice of hospitality leave room for growth, room for inclusion generally far beyond our comfort zone. As we find again and again, the hospitality of Jesus is not comfortable but radical.

In *Soul Feast* Marjorie Thompson writes: “If a sworn enemy showed up at your doorstep asking for food and shelter, you were bound to supply his request, along with protection and safe passage as long as he was on your land. ...hospitality to strangers was a matter of mutual survival...a kind of social covenant.”

Hospitality characterized the way of being in the world for both ancient Jews and Christians and it goes well beyond the provision of food, drink, safety. Indeed, “it mysteriously links us to God as well as to one another.” The letter to the Hebrews counsels: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (13:2) The hospitality offered by the disciples to the stranger who accompanied them on the road to Emmaus offered them an encounter with the Risen Christ, just as the quality of welcome our country and our churches offers to immigrants and other strangers, costly as it may be, will bring insight and unexpected blessings and insight.

Abraham, already close to 100 years, runs to greet the three strangers in the heat of the day, bows to them, then orders those in his household to prepare the finest meal within their means. In extending themselves freely, they receive the remarkable news that Sarah will bear a son in her old age.

In our gospel, Jesus counsels his apostles to take up his practices that manifested the realm of God: curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, casting our demons in the radical hospitality that he manifested to those who were excluded from society. The practice of radical hospitality shows the extent to which God seeks to communicate with God’s people, to make God’s love, acceptance, and blessing known to each one. Jesus models hospitality for us in the washing of feet, in the expansiveness of welcome, in the acceptance of those struggling with demons and illnesses affecting bodies and minds. He demonstrates that hospitality is a reciprocal gift. He cautions that there will be those who will not understand this building of new relationships through the opening of awareness, homes, and hearts.

In *Holy Listening*, Margaret Guenther writes: “Since the days of Abraham, God’s messengers have had a way of turning up in unlikely places and at unlikely times.” She links this story with the account of the Annunciation, another story of “ultimate surprise: God’s messenger breaks into the routine of the ordinary and the predictable, and announces the divine presence among and within us. Sometimes I ask myself...What would you do if an angel were waiting in the back seat of your car, or in your office, or at home in your kitchen? You, with a deadline to meet, or a spouse who is demanding a little space in your life, or a sick child, or a critical encounter with your boss looming up in the very near future.” These sometimes “troublesome and unpredictable angels...turn up at surprising and rarely convenient times and places.” Indeed, these “small annunciations,” she writes “don’t always seem like good news. Indeed, they may look like set-backs, interruptions and intrusions into our tidy, well-planned lives.”

Let us seek to live with this radical and unconditional openness to others of Jesus Christ. Let us live in expectation that we will find him in the eyes and also in the needs of others, and let us sustain each other through a commitment to gather and meet each other in the name and in the peace and openness of Christ.

*Amen.*