

LIVING LIKE LYDIA

Physician Rachel Remen conducts retreats, for cancer patients. The retreats include yoga, meditation and other practices rooted in a holistic approach to treatment.

At one of her retreats she hosted a Polish-American survivor of a Nazi concentration camp named Yitzak. He had been diagnosed with cancer two years earlier.

There is what some would call a touchy-feely element to the work of the retreat center and for Yitzak it was all new and a bit uncomfortable.

”Vat is all dis, all dis huggy-huggy?” he asked. “Vat is dis luff the strangers? Vat is dis?” (*Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 154)

During the week long retreat, though, he participated fully in the ebb and flow of the experience. In fact, on the fourth morning, during mediation, he had what might be called a mystical experience. It seemed to him as if a deep pink light was emanating from his body, a light that flowed out of his heart. It made him feel very vulnerable.

Remen writes: “For many years [Yitzak] had lived, as it were, in a world of strangers. . . . [H]e had been very cautious with respect to his heart, loving only close people, only family.” (*Ibid*, 155)

Yitzak processed his experience on a walk along the beach, but still seemed a bit uneasy.

As the week wrapped up, Dr. Remen checked in with him to see how he was doing with all his new experiences.

Yitzak explained to her that it seemed God was trying to tell him something. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Ah, Rachel-le, I say to Him, ‘God is it okay to luff strangers? And God says, ‘Yitzak, vat is dis *strangers*? You make strangers, I don’t make strangers.’” (156)

What is the old saying, “There are no strangers here, just friends we haven’t met?”

God doesn’t make strangers. God doesn’t create us as beings intended to live separate lives—cut off from each other by whatever differences we may have. God creates us to live in community. God creates us to welcome one another with open arms and open hearts. God doesn’t make strangers. We do. And as a result many

of us wander through life feeling cut off, abandoned, even alone. But, the good news is clear, we are not alone. God is with us. And God calls us to make that truth known to others not so much by what we say, but rather by what we do.

There is a word for all this, and that word is hospitality. Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we Christians are called to practice hospitality. It is, arguably, the most constant and consistent theme throughout the scriptures, Old and New Testament alike. It is captured in the laws of the ancient Israelites, who are reminded over and over again to be hospitable to the resident aliens, the strangers, the immigrants, legal or otherwise, in their midst. It is seen in the gospels when Jesus feeds the hungry crowds, heals the sick, and praises those who have welcomed outcasts into their homes. And it is seen in our reading from the book of Acts. Indeed, this story captures the very essence of what it means to practice hospitality.

Paul is on one of his long trips throughout the lands of the Roman Empire. It is one of his so-called missionary journeys. He is preaching and teaching about Jesus, and helping establish churches wherever he goes.

He has a dream, in which he is told to go to the region known as Macedonia. When he arrives there, he stops for a while in Philippi. Usually Paul finds the synagogue in town and preaches there. But there apparently are not enough Jewish men (ten are needed) to form a synagogue in town. So those who are Jewish, along with any non-Jews who are attracted to Jewish monotheism, gather by the river to pray. Most, if not all of those Paul finds at the riverside are women. Among them is one named Lydia.

Lydia, we discover, is a rather unusual woman for her day, for she owns her own home, and runs her own business. She trades in purple cloth. Purple dye came from a particular type of shellfish, and was very costly to produce. As a result purple cloth was usually bought and worn by royalty and other persons of great means. As a result, Lydia was well off. And well connected.

But she was seeking after a different kind of well-being, a different kind of connection. And when she hears Paul preach, she finds what she is looking for. As Luke writes: “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” (Acts 16:14c) And so, Lydia is baptized. She becomes a follower of Jesus.

And what is the first thing she does? How does she first put her new-found faith into action? She invites this total stranger, this man of a different nation, a different culture, to come and stay in her home. Not only Paul, but his traveling companions as well. Lydia’s first act as a Christian is to practice hospitality! And partly because of her generosity, Paul is able to continue his ministry in Philippi and in time build up a congregation. As William Barclay writes: “[Lydia’s] home becomes the spiritual center for the entire city . . .” (*Daily Study Bible: Acts*, 235) All because she practiced hospitality. All because she was willing to welcome the stranger.

Sometimes folks ask me, “John, what’s your vision for Saugatuck?” That’s it in a nutshell. That, sisters and brothers, is my dream, my vision, my hope, for Saugatuck. I would pray that we too might become the spiritual center for this entire town! Not in the sense of having a corner on peoples religious affiliation. I don’t mean that all who live in Westport need to join our congregation. Rather, I mean when folks see our steeple boldly pointing to the sky, they might be reminded that God is a god of justice, peace and love. I mean that when they meet one of us on the streets or in the shops or at the train station, they might be reminded of their own need to be connected to the Holy One. I want people to say, “Saugatuck? Yes, that’s a place where all people are welcomed. That’s a congregation that reaches out in love to the poor and the oppressed. That’s a faith community that really puts its beliefs into action.” And how will that happen? What can we do to live into that vision? We can practice radical hospitality, for you see, living our vision, means living like Lydia.

It means literally opening our doors to the stranger. Our projected renovation plans will help us do that in a fuller and better way. The accessibility that our plans provide for will make it possible for all sorts of folks to use our facilities that are now locked out. Our welcome center will make it clear that we are serious about turning strangers into friends. Our plans for renovated space for children, and a new room for youth, boldly proclaim our desire to incorporate even the youngest among us into our life as a church.

But it will take more than a renovated building. Have you ever been to a conference or a convention where they had a hospitality room—a specially set aside suite for refreshments and casual conversations? That’s all well and good, but if you get there, and nobody reaches out a hand and says, “Welcome!” if you get there and nobody asks, “How can I serve you?” the grandest room at the Hyatt becomes nothing more than an empty space. Yes, we must grow our space—but we also need to grow in our commitment to allowing God to fill it and us with the spirit of hospitality! Wee all need to develop more of the spirit of hospitality that fills the hearts of folks like Edna Yergin, Ina Lozyniak, Carol Leyshon and their team of women who provide Memorial Receptions for those who grieve. I have seen these good women of Saugatuck give up a whole Saturday to lay out the linen clothes, and pull out the silver tea service, for people they don’t even know! The coffee is poured, the cookies baked and served, for complete strangers! That is practicing hospitality! That spirit needs to pervade all we do as a congregation!

Benedictine monks and nuns live under the Rule of Benedict, the sixth century founder of monasticism. Benedict’s rule emphasizes this need to practice hospitality. Even if they are in the midst of prayer, if a stranger comes to the door of the monastery needing food or shelter, the monks are to tend to his or her needs. “All guests who present themselves,” writes Benedict, “are to be welcomed as Christ.”

Joan Chittister is a Benedictine nun who has done a lot of thinking about how the Rule of Benedict might apply to modern folks, especially those of us who don't live in monastic settings. In one of her books she suggests that we may need to look at more than how we dole out food for the hungry or clothing for those in rags, important as those things are. We also need to look at the very systems that perpetuate hunger and poverty. In one of her books she writes: "Hospitality for us may as much involve a change of attitudes and perspectives as it does a handout. To practice hospitality in our world, it may be necessary to evaluate all the laws and all the promotions and all the invitation lists of corporate and political society from the point of view of the people who never make the lists. Then hospitality may demand that we work to change things." (*The Rule of Benedict: Insight for the Ages*, 142)

You see, what we do here at church, what we do here at Saugatuck is important in and of itself. But the world is watching us, and so our actions can also be symbols. Our willingness to welcome all people, to spend money to put in an elevator and improve our accessibility, symbolizes the need to create a world accessible to all people, regardless of disability. Our willingness to go through the difficult O & A process, and declare ourselves open to and affirming of all people, even those of differing sexual orientations, symbolizes the need to create a world where all people are valued for who they are. Our willingness to do something as simple as laying out a lunch after church and say, "You all come," symbolizes the need to create a world where all people have enough to eat. As Diana Butler Bass writes: "Through hospitality, Christians imitate God's welcome." (*Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 82) What we do and say here at church is enormously important! For as a Christian congregation, practicing hospitality means, at the very minimum, helping all people feel at ease here within our four walls. But it also means far more than that. For while we can and should provide an oasis, a haven of safety and rest, we are also called to work for a day when all places are hospitable. It means working to eliminate the attitudes that make strangers out of our fellow human beings. It means working to change the systems that keep us apart.

Practicing hospitality has implications for all the major concerns that confront our modern world. Truly practicing hospitality could change our approach to issues like war and peace, immigration reform, poverty, health care, even sub-prime mortgages! If we Christians, never mind anybody else, were to practice radical hospitality in all our affairs, imagine how the world could and would be changed!

Old Yitzak heard God calling him to practice hospitality in a new way. And sisters and brothers, that same God is calling you and me. "I don't make strangers," God tells us. And neither should we.

Neither should we.

**Amen
John H. Danner**

