

Sermon Hospitality 201 January 31, 2010 Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO 80222 Jeremiah 1: 4-8

The Lord Chooses Jeremiah

⁴ *A message came to me from the Lord. He said,*

⁵ *"Before I formed you in your mother's body I chose you.
Before you were born I set you apart to serve me.
I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations."*

⁶ *"You are my Lord and King," I said. "I don't know how to speak. I'm only a child."*

⁷ *But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I'm only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to. You must say everything I command you to say."⁸ Do not be afraid of the people I send you to. I am with you. I will save you," announces the Lord.*

⁹ *Then the Lord reached out his hand. He touched my mouth and spoke to me. He said, "I have put my words in your mouth."¹⁰ Today I am appointing you to speak to nations and kingdoms. I want you to pull them up by the roots and tear them down. I want you to destroy them and crush them. But I also want you to build them up and plant them."*

The scripture we just heard and read is a key part of God's hospitality, God's welcome! Today we begin the second part of a 3 part series on hospitality which coincides with the three sessions that our Church Vitality team of Lori Carroll and Erin Shock have planned. All three groups, A,B, and C have met once and discussed and shared the positive and negative experiences of having been welcomed or ignored. Good conversations and sharing are taking place. People are learning more about each other and how they were received here at Salem when they first came.

Hospitality is like learning to ride a bicycle. One doesn't automatically know how to ride one, balance, move the pedals and work the brakes. One has to be taught; one has to experience it and one learns from practicing. We may think we are hospitable, but the ways we welcome, the words we say, the non verbal signs, the listening can convey something quite different.

So, today we ask the question: What does God's hospitality look like, feel like?

The scripture we heard is the beginning of God's welcome! It is specifically, extending an invitation! That's right! God invites. Now in that invitation is a risk that it will not be received, heard, experienced, or it can forthrightly, rejected. Jeremiah, like Moses, heard the invitation, but was hesitant; he gave excuses, like Moses, but in the end he accepted the call, he welcomed the opportunity to be a part of God's participation in the world.

God's invitation is to all people! God's invite is to participate in the world which is being renewed, transformed, changed, one person at a time. The invitation is to love. Sometimes it means as it did for Jeremiah, to be a prophet, to speak words of reconciliation, words that will bring a change of direction and a change of heart.

The stories of the Prodigal Son, of Abraham, of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10) all point to the invitation which can be rejected. Yes, God's love can be rejected. Yes, God reaching out in love take a risk.

Readiness, Risk, Repentance, Recognition are the themes that Amy Oden talks about as signs of God's Hospitality in her book "God's Welcome." She uses these categories to help understand the story of Abraham as he prepared for strangers. He had listened in his heart; he had opened his heart to the unexpected God. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, also opened her heart to the unexpected God who awoke in her the willingness also to participate in God's love of all people.

Amy continues with other indications from the story of Abraham: **Risk**. This can mean that we are not well received, or people might not like who we are as a church or what we have to offer. In God's hospitality, we learn that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Whether one joins is not the goal. It is being open to sharing the love of all. Another concept is **Repentance**, which Amy Oden refers to as our ability to get out of our expectation, and takes all people seriously as God's love child. When we are able to do that, we are "**recognizing**" the other, and putting them first.

God's hospitality does include readiness, risk, repentance and recognition! Looking at the Christian story, Jesus' message is one of unconditional love, welcome and affirmation of all God's people. The prodigal son left home and came back, welcomed, loved. Zacchaeus climbed a tree because the spirit in him was moving him to seek deeper spirituality. Jesus took the risk of being rejected, he was able with the Spirit's help, to change his own attitudes about people, and he was able to perceive and recognize outcasts, downtrodden, and even the successful, like Zacchaeus as God's beloved.

In his book, *Encounters at the Counter*, Alan Johnson explains that the root of the word, "hospitality" is "love of stranger."

We are all strangers to each other. We are all strangers to being totally and completely accepted and affirmed as a child of God. Yes, we are all different, having different abilities, gifts, interests. Teachers recognize this with their students. Medical practitioners observe this in their patients; parents learn that each child has special gifts as well. Clergy recognize and learn that each parishioner and each church is at a different place in their spiritual journey with God. Just as God welcomes all, so too, do teachers, nurses and doctors, parents and clergy welcome all and encourage, build up, appreciate and affirm each.

Here's the best part -- the reckless, broken and redeemed part: In practicing God's hospitality, we get a glimpse of God's intention for the whole world! This holistic, shalom-laden invitational way of life will be seen in our worship and Sabbath-keeping, mutual aid and stewardship, confession and forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, generosity, peacemaking and justice seeking (Genesis 12:1-3, John 3:16, John 13:34-35, II Corinthians 5:18-6:1, Romans 12). In short, grabbing hold of God's hospitality pushes us ever more deeply toward living in the reign and love of God.

For as Alan Johnson quoting others says: "Hospitality is not a planned event or a series of routine gestures. It is the stance of the heart that is abandoned to love" (Pg 25)

And love has to be ready to be received; it can be risky; it involves a new way of responding for it no longer means one lives and loves for oneself but for others. God's hospitality does that.

God's hospitality can come in unexpected ways. Scriptures contains stories of people's experiences of a God who comes and welcomes people. It can be through forgiveness, or through disruption, challenge or change, through being broken and reawakening, through a call to

something new or risky, through the reaching out of others, such as at a time of loss when someone calls. God's welcome can come through second chances, or awakening. God's welcome is seen in our church community too: through change, through different heritages, through service.

So what is it that God's hospitality is calling us to? An extravagant, open, gracious, accepting, affirming love of God's creation and all of God's people.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer: From Mennonite Hospitality website:

Dear God,

We yearn to be the church you want us to become.

*There is a restlessness among us and
we are waiting for something to be born.*

We want to join in what you are already doing in the world.

*In our worship and life together, in our ministry and outreach,
we want to give people a glimpse of your intentions
for the whole world.*

*Help us to welcome sinners, love our enemies, and form a community
that is visibly different from the culture around us
as a sign of what you are doing in the world.*

*Help us experience your love and grace, grow in our relationship with Jesus,
and experience the power of your Spirit
as we offer your good news to others.*