

Intro.: (Dilemmas of limitations)

A. Illustration ...

1. I know a woman who was driving her car by herself on a rural highway. *She was a Christian who was serious about following Jesus. Up ahead of her she saw what appeared to be a hitchhiker beside the road. As she approached, she saw it was a bearded young man with a large backpack.*

On this particular drive, she was ahead of schedule so she wasn't rushed for time. But she had to make a snap decision. Should she stop and maybe pick him up if he was going her direction? What would you do?

2. Several times in my own life I've been walking on the streets of big cities ... Cairo, Atlanta, Chicago, St. Louis ...

I've often found myself in uncomfortable encounters with beggars or panhandlers. Sometimes I've seen them ahead of me on the sidewalk hustling someone else and I've looked for a way to cut into a shop or walk on the other side of the street just to avoid them.

Sometimes I can't avoid them, and they're suddenly right in front of me, hand open with a mumbled request. How I respond has varied greatly, depending on how much of a hurry I felt in, how much small change or bills I had on me, and especially depending on my mood at the moment: Stressed or settled? Compassionate or cynical? Adventurous or withdrawn?

Sometimes I've brushed them off and kept going ... sometimes I've quickly given them a buck or two with a half-hearted smile and been on my way ... & sometimes I've taken a few minutes to listen to their story, regardless of whether I have any money to give them.

And even when I have given money, my inner struggle doesn't end. Half of the time I can walk away saying "thank you God for that opportunity ... please bless them." And the other half I'm grumbling and second-guessing myself, figuring they'll probably spend it on booze or drugs.

B. In the real world we live in, hospitality with strangers is neither simple nor easy ... & it usually takes us out of our comfort zones

II. Review

A. As we started this series I suggested a simple definition of hospitality from Hesston College Bible teacher Michele Hershberger:

1. *Hospitality = seeing the stranger through the eyes of Jesus* (Michele Hershberger, [A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises](#), ©1999 Herald Press, p. 31)

a) I introduced us to an unconventional view of what hospitality is ... a

radical view in fact

b) I proposed that hospitality goes much further than just having your friends & relatives over for a pleasant dinner when it suits you

2. Along with Hershberger's book, I have found very helpful a book by Asbury Seminary professor Christine Pohl, called Making Room

a) About 20 years ago, as Professor Pohl interviewed many Christians who were serious about living out hospitality, one practitioner explained,

"I believe that hospitality means to give of yourself. ... In other types of services you can give of your talents .. or skills ... or resources. [But] the tasks are not what hospitality is about.

Hospitality is giving of yourself." (Christine Pohl, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, ©1999 Eerdmans Publishing, p. 72)

3. 2 weeks ago this radical biblical hospitality was illustrated for you by Karla Minter, in the story of a starving widow & a bold prophet

4. Last week after Pastor Cindy's sermon you had the chance to enter into the ultimate re-enactment of divine hospitality: The Lord's Supper

a) With Jesus serving as the host but also offering himself up literally as the meal, you became the blessed guests of a banquet being served all over the globe on World Communion Sunday

b) And while you received spiritual nourishment from above in the form of the bread and cup, you also strengthened community ties in the physicality of washing hands or feet with someone else

c) It was a hospitality experience in 2 dimensions: both vertical and horizontal

B. But all those things happened in the safe confines of this sanctuary, a place very familiar to most of you

III. Today I am reminding us of a bald truth:

A. Biblical hospitality is hard stuff!

1. It is not easy. The examples and commandments about hospitality take us way out of our comfort zones!

2. But what is it with hospitality that makes us so uncomfortable? Ahh, that's more the focus of this service today

B. Today we're acknowledging that by normal human standards, biblical hospitality looks crazy ... it looks ridiculously dangerous

1. The reason we're uncomfortable with the Bible's version of hospitality ... is the hazards & the limitations of actually practicing it

2. Undeniably, hospitality with strangers can be risky & dangerous.

a) Living in a society that exaggerates and plays off our fears has

drummed this "stranger danger" belief into us.

b) Although it's not statistically very common, people have indeed been robbed, assaulted or even killed by others who abused their hospitality.

c) In a little over a month in our worship we will support our church's Safe Spaces Policies by observing Child Safety Sunday, so I want to be clear that we take the safety of vulnerable persons seriously here

C. So what are some small steps we can take toward hospitality that welcomes strangers, & not just our friends & family?

IV. There is far too much to be said on this subject, **but let me suggest 3 steps we can take**, when danger & fear tell us to just avoid strangers and not get involved

A. Avoid focusing on differences & exaggerating others' strangeness

1. History is full of the brutal treatment of whole groups of people who were demonized & made to seem scary & less than human ...

a) The Nazi holocaust of the Jews ... the campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans or in Rwanda or against Native Americans in the U.S.

b) We see it today in the ugly resurgence of white supremacy & hostile language used toward Muslims, immigrants & refugees

2. You & I may personally distance ourselves from such examples, but there is a more subtle version of emphasizing differences:

a) Sometimes when church people discuss ministries with a group of people different from ourselves, we casually talk about what "these people" want, or how we will welcome "them" into "our" church.

b) This kind of language reinforces "otherness", it can make people look one-dimensional & it creates walls rather than building bridges.

c) Here in church let us try to resist the use of "us" and "them" language

whether it be referring to people affected by poverty, undocumented status, a different sexual orientation, or racism...

or even just referring to people who prefer wearing tattoos or listening to rap music

d) There certainly are real differences all around us, which we can't sweep under the rug ... but will we make those differences into a core identity for ourselves and a label put on someone else?

3. We are all equally made in God's image.

B. A 2nd small step we can take is to deliberately put ourselves in

marginal places or in contact with marginal people

1. I've noted before that some of us in this church can go a whole day or more and every person we interact with is a committed Christian, maybe even a Mennonite!!

2. So maybe it's time to venture out of our cocoons occasionally.

a) The unusualness & discomfort of interacting with strangers in need is exactly why I have been involved in GIHN

b) I don't volunteer there because it's always fun or always satisfying. Nor am I seeking yet another evening away from home doing churchy things. I do it because it "keeps me honest"

When I serve at GIHN, I am always reminded that life is crappy for a lot of people in this world ... people whom Jesus loves.

Some people have to deal with one hardship after another!

3. So when I put myself in that place of discomfort with homeless persons, I try to take on the following attitudes, which I also recommend to you:

a) We can look for genuine human connection points whenever we find ourselves with a stranger or with someone who makes us nervous...

b) We can be open to a new relationship with that person we've met ... see if we can get to know enough of one detail about that person's life so that we can pray for him or her

4. Speaking of praying for strangers, this reminds me of a timely personal struggle that the Holy Spirit wouldn't let me keep hidden

a) Some of you know that another weeklong Revive Indiana is returning to our community, starting tonight at Maple City Chapel

You may also know that I have some mixed feelings about these big Revive campaigns ... there are elements of style & theology that are just not my thing, but I also cannot deny that a lot of people have been brought closer to the Lord Jesus Christ thru Revive Indiana, so praise the Lord!

Besides the lively nightly worship & preaching events, one of the major Revive activities is to have teams go out into the community twice a day, asking strangers how they can pray for them ...

When done in an insensitive manner, that has made me uncomfortable

b) So a few weeks ago I half-heartedly attended a meeting for local pastors about this hastily arranged return of Revive Indiana.

I had already planned to go to 1 or 2 of the worship sessions but

nothing more.

But then I heard a fellow Mennonite pastor describe her experience 3 years ago of reluctantly going out on one of these prayer teams

(a) She secretly felt inadequate to have the words to do this, even as a pastor! Yet she went anyway and it was a powerful experience to do with others.

(b) Engaging strangers for the purpose of praying with them is still not something she feels comfortable doing, but that experience greatly increased her comfort level around strangers and it gave her more spiritual eyes with which she now views strangers.

c) Hmm ... the Spirit started talking to me and hasn't let me go:

Hospitality as seeing the stranger through the eyes of Jesus?

The hospitality book by Michele Hershberger does have a chapter on the close connection between hospitality & evangelism

An inner voice began pushing me that if this pastor friend of mine could step out of her comfort zone to join prayer teams in the community, maybe I could too

Even now I am tempted to silence that voice ... but how could I justify preaching in a hospitality series, encouraging my people to deliberately put themselves in marginal places, and then I walk away from an opportunity God was showing me to do exactly that!

I guess I'm asking for your prayers that I don't lose my nerve to try this at least once this week ... Anybody want to join me?

5. Bottom line: the more you stay inside your own personal comfort zone, the less you will understand or experience biblical hospitality

C. Finally, the 3rd small step is to do the tough mental & spiritual work of setting boundaries

1. In a world with dangerous people & limited resources, boundaries are essential for Xian communities that want to be hospitable.

a) Christine Pohl in her study of Christian communities with purposeful ministries of hospitality, wrote, "*Communities struggle with boundaries, and they struggle without them.*" (Pohl, p. 129)

b) Every community needs some boundaries, not only for the sake of the security of the hosts but also for a sense of safety for the guests

2. One way of reducing risks while still extending Xian hospitality is to make it more communal and more public

a) This does not mean we make hospitality less personal ... it means we may initiate hospitality in public spaces, but then not continue it in totally

private spaces

b) E.g. you may be wise to avoid extending personal hospitality to a stranger when you're by yourself in an isolated place ...

c) But rather than ignoring the situation, try reaching out to a family member or a Sunday School class friend or a neighbor to join you in hospitality for that stranger's needs

3. In short, dealing with boundaries as we practice hospitality has and always will be a challenge for Christians. Pohl summarizes this well:

The wideness of God's mercy and the generosity of God's welcome must frame our thinking about limits and boundaries. God's kindness continually challenges us to reconsider our commitments. ... Boundary issues are always slightly ambiguous when we realize that God is already working in the life of every person who comes. Recognizing this ... keeps the possibility alive that the boundaries could be redrawn.

(Pohl, pp. 129-30, 141)

V. Conclusion

A. So to conclude, maybe in your own life it's not so crucial to have a fixed personal ethic for how you will respond to, say beggars or hitchhikers

1. God may be calling you to reset some of your boundaries for responding to people who are "different", especially when you recognize that God is already working in the life of every person who comes to you, whether that person realizes it or not.
2. In this complex world filled with sinful people, ourselves included, obeying God's call to hospitality will never be easy, and it will not respond readily to rigid, hard-and-fast rules

B. More important than getting the boundaries just right ... is making sure we get our hearts right for why we engage in hospitality:

1. Our aim is to do as it says in 1 John 3:18, a key verse from this summer's Mennonite convention in Orlando ...[\[read\]](#)
2. As we attempt to see Jesus in every stranger that we meet, let our hearts also be tuned to go out in obedience to that simple but classic hospitality text found in Hebrews 13:2 [\[read\]](#)
3. May it be so among us, responding to how God welcomed us!