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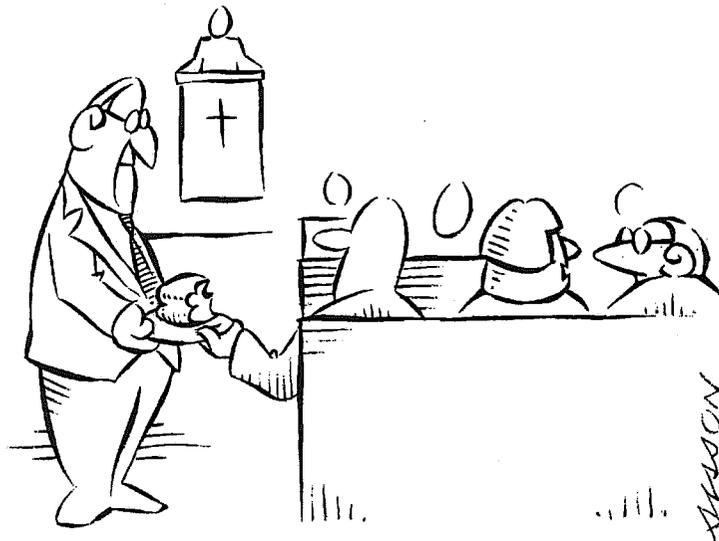
A Quarterly for Church Renewal

VOLUME 13 · NUMBER 2 · SPRING 2004

Classical Worship for Today: *Hospitality Means Making Room*



Wilbur Ellsworth



I'M GONNA HAVE TO PASS ON COMMUNION THIS WEEK - I'M ON ONE OF THOSE LOW CARB DIETS.

There is a basic reason why hospitality needs to be joined to worship: our increasingly secular and non-churched culture gives people almost no possible way to enter into classical Christian worship as they are. Invite someone to a church today where worship has not been carefully arranged to reflect contemporary culture and it is likely that the result will be a one-time visit. The great tradition of the Church has become increasingly distant to our neighbors today. Evangelism is more than getting people to decide for Christ; it is winning people to become disciples and that means introducing them to the Church's family heritage of worship. Worship is the context in which the larger vision of a God-centered life view becomes a reality. Today, introducing people to Christ means we must also introduce them to the life of faith and the Church. The task is greater than ever and it is the Christian community that needs to make the first move.

All this is to say that we need to understand what is involved in bringing those who are not the people to God to be people of God in the Church today. The question we need to face is simple, but hard: Do we have room in our lives for such people? One of the most heart-rending phrases in the entire Bible is the story of the Bethlehem innkeeper's response to Joseph's request: "No room." These two words sum up the

story of humanity's response to God's incarnating love. The innkeeper isn't seen as hostile, unkind, or even indifferent—just filled to capacity. His resources were exhausted; every room had an occupant. As sorry as he might be, Mary and Joseph wouldn't find his establishment a place where they would be taken in. We have made that problem the sign of our times. We simply have no room. Our houses are bigger than ever. Our vehicles have capacities unimagined by our parents. Often our church facilities have provisions that an earlier and simpler age would have thought inconceivable. But we don't have room in our lives for the people who are outside the household of faith. As I walked by a conversation at a health club last week I heard a pleasant young couple explaining to a physical trainer that they had "very busy life styles." The tone of the conversation seemed to be heading toward explaining that while they wanted to be healthy and fit, they really didn't have much time or energy in their lives to devote to such a goal. "No room."

Simply stated, God expects us to love people we may not even know. Loving people we don't know is the definition of hospitality, "the love of the stranger." Most of us confess we often fail to love the people we *do* know, to take time and care for them. So how do we make room in our lives for even *more* people? Let me begin a sentence that you will probably be able to finish quite easily. "I'd like to do more to reach out to people, but I don't have . . ." (Suggested possible answers are: time, money, an attractive home, interest, energy). The issue is a crisis for many of us who protest, "I don't have room in my life for one more thing or one more person. I think of one woman who protested to me, "I don't have room for any more friends in my life!"

When a religious expert asked him about inheriting eternal life, the Lord didn't give a simple answer. Rather, he reminded him that life is essentially rooted in two loves, love for God and love for the neighbor. Everything else is secondary to these two loves. Unfortunately, the Lord's answer didn't solve the man's question, so he tried a follow-up question. He was trying to justify the way he was presently living,

probably because he couldn't see any way to live differently. Luke 10 records Jesus' answer in the story of the Good Samaritan. This story, about four men on a journey, is one of the great masterpieces of all human literature and comes to us with the penetrating spiritual power of God's Word. The Lord's point couldn't be clearer or more demanding: *Love for God and for our neighbor means other loves will have to go in order to make room for the first loves. Loving the stranger means making room.*

Making room for the stranger requires "heart space." Clearly in the Lord's story the priest and the Levite didn't have room to love the victim of the robbers. One significant detail of the story we often miss is that these people weren't rushing to get *to* worship, they were going *from* worship. They were all going *down* the road from Jerusalem. Whatever they had been doing in Jerusalem hadn't increased their love for God and neighbor to the point that they would remove other commitments to make room for the stranger. Only the Samaritan, a person dishonored and looked down upon in Jewish culture, had "room" to stop, to care and to help. Why is this? We could easily answer and say that the Samaritan had a big heart. "Big heart" sounds like a permanent and perhaps even a congenital condition as if some people have them and some people don't! But do "hearts" come in different sizes? A wiser view is to see the issue as an uncluttered heart, a heart that has learned from the Lord Jesus himself how to save space for others. Deuteronomy 24:19-22 has some practical advice about changing our capacity for loving the stranger. We are instructed not to take all the profit we can; leave some of the harvest behind so that when the unexpected stranger in need comes along there is something left for him or her. That is called living with intentional margins. Don't fill your life with everything you possibly can. Sort life into the essential and the optional. *Every human heart has enough space for the essential. It's the optional that overloads us until we have no room for the essential.* None of us get all the time and money we think we need, but we all get enough heart space for the eternal, love for God and the neighbor. Our dilemma is not heart *size* but

heart *content*. It's the age-old question of being a "tosser" or a "saver." A Danish proverb says it well, "If there is room in the heart, there is room in the house."

Not having room for loving people we don't even know is a heart problem. In classical spiritual terms it is the problem of greed. We so crave what we think will fill our lives that we clog the arteries of our hearts with things that leave no place for God or neighbor. And there is only one help for us: the love of God. Experiencing and receiving God's love is the only way we will ever get room in our hearts for the stranger. 1 John 4:19 places it squarely before us, "We love because he first loved us." This penetrating word tells us of:

- (1) our innate helplessness,
- (2) God's necessary initiative, and
- (3) our response to finding hope.

When we are walking through life and encounter the stranger our first reaction may be not to love him. We must seek the love of God, desiring a love that is not merely a hidden way to meet our own desires. This comes only from him. And in this struggle to love people so that they may become worshipers of the real and living God, we must ourselves turn to worship in spirit and in truth. True worship is not a confirmation of our culturally derived desires and pleasures. True worship is an unrelenting worth reassessment that drives out our idolatries and our greeds. True worship illumines our lives and drives us into the disciplines of spiritual formation. It is in this struggle where the passions and desires that drive us beyond our capacity to love God and neighbor are brought into captivity. True worship teaches us the mission of private and corporate love.

Love that is strong enough to reach out to people we don't know, so that they might come to worship the God they don't know, begins with loving God's Son. Loving Jesus is the beginning of our loving the stranger, of loving the needy, of loving the one for whom we have no room. Yes, our worship of the

Triune God sees Jesus as Lord, Savior and King, but that is not how we first encounter him. Jesus always comes to us as an intruder seeking shelter in our lives. He stands at our door and knocks to receive welcome and admission. Perhaps that is one of the reasons he came as the baby of a refugee couple who could not provide a place for him even to be born. The God who made the world and who needs nothing from us came to us in helpless poverty. Jesus came to us needing shelter, food and clothing. *Jesus needs hospitality!* Do we have any room for this stranger? We will begin to make room to love the stranger when we have learned to make room to love Jesus. When we learn to make room to love Jesus we will discover we now have room for the needy friends he brings with him.

God expects us to make room to love people we don't know. And that begins with his Son. Making room for the stranger means making room for Jesus. Lord, have mercy!

Author

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