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On the Occasion of the Installation of

Rev. Juan Manuel Santiago-Rodriguez

### Hospitality and the Beloved Community

Matthew 7: 7-12

On this occasion, at this moment of celebration that is at once holy ceremony, an important ritual, and a festive occasion, we gather to install Rev. Juan Manuel Santiago-Rodriguez as pastor of the University Baptist Church in Seattle. An installation sets a person or a thing in its place. It connects it to the surrounding structure. It makes the necessary adjustments for use. An installation is a kind of induction and the induction is a beckoning to come in. It is the event that officially brings a leader through an open door. S/he crosses the threshold from outside to inside. Yet, an event is never confined to one moment, one gathering, one happening. The event is that which is and is not yet. It is that which has arrived yet is still on the way. To quote American philosopher John Caputo: "The event is the deed." And when this event is finished the work has only begun.

In the African-American preaching tradition there is a moment in the sermon that comes at the end where the preacher reminds the audience about the names and attributes of God. S/he speaks of Jesus and the power of Holy Spirit. Let us begin at the end. God is the source and the strength of all life. God is the I AM that I AM. God is All in All. God sits high and looks low. God knows our down sitting and our up- rising. God is our protection, a sword and shield. In Jesus, God is a rock in a weary land, the Rose of Sharon , the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star, Mary' Baby who fed the multitudes, preached peace, healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out confusion, protected the weak, promised the earth as a inheritance to the meek, identified with the least, the last, and the lost, instructed justice for

the poor, who lived and taught a radical, extreme love that even loved the enemy, who commanded the wind and the rain: "Peace, Be still"; Jesus who threw the money changers out of the temple, was arrested, took a beating all night long, hung on a cross, died, rose early on Easter Sunday with all power in his hands. In Holy Spirit, God is mother. She comforts and gives us wisdom. She provides for our every need and dries every tear. She sings sweet lullabies and reminds us that weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning. She reminds us that the Lord is our shepherd and we need not live in want or worry or fear, that God leads and restores, that God is able to prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies, God anoints and gives overflowing blessings and that goodness and mercy follows us wherever we go, and we have a home with God forever.

Now what? Usually this is the moment when the preacher opens the doors of the church and invites those who do not believe to believe and to join the body of Christ. S/he invites those who are believers and who do not have a church home to come into the faith community, to enter into righteous relationship with God and with God's people. It is a moment that says "Come on in." It is a moment of hospitality.

We understand hospitality as an act of welcome. It is a welcome that comes after an invitation. We invite the guests to come. We invite people into the body of Christ, into the faith community. We invite them with the expectation that we will help them and that they will help us. We are prepared for a spiritual relationship to grow. However, it is important that we do not forget the origins of the word and the concept of hospitality. Hospitality derives from the same Latin root as the word hospital. The Latin root is *hospitalis* which means: "of the guest." The hospital is the place where the sick go to get well, where the injured are made whole, where a guest may receive rest and care.

When we consider the history of the hospital we see that the idea is more than 6,000- years-old. In the beginning religion and healthcare were linked. Certain deities were associated with healing—

Saturn, Asclepius. Brahmic hospitals were established in Sri Lanka and a chain of hospitals were established in Hindustan. The Romans established hospitals for their soldiers, and when Constantine saw the cross in the sky and became a Christian, he established hospitals as a means to end the isolation of the sick. The sick we seen as still a part of the community, and the community bore an obligation to care for the sick. This became a Christian duty. Monks built monastic infirmaries throughout the Western Roman Empire. In addition to the sick, “the monasteries also opened their doors to pilgrims and to other travelers.” (Encyclopedia Britannica online)

During the Crusades, hospitals were built to treat pestilence and disease that always comes with war. Arabs also built hospitals in Baghdad, Damascus and Cordoba in Spain. They admitted people “regardless of religion, race or social order.” Gradually, in Christendom, the responsibility for hospitals moved from the church to the civil authorities. Cortez built the first hospital in North America in Mexico City in 1524. The second was built by France in Canada in 1639. And, the first hospital built in the United States was a hospital for soldiers in Manhattan in 1663.

I rehearse this history to show the close ties between the spiritual and physical healing that the ancients understood and the relationship between the hospital and the hotel. I tell this story to show that very early in its history, the church understood the healing qualities of hospitality and the importance of community to the healing process. But, hospitality is a risk. The sick may bring a contagion into the hospital space that has the potential to infect the caregivers. The guest may come to the hotel with intent to do harm. Any welcome is an act of faith. We believe that our cordiality will benefit both host and guest.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida understands the risks of hospitality and says further that hospitality is really only hospitality when we open our doors to an uninvited guest, when the arrival of the guest is a surprise, when it is an interruption. We have to stop what we are doing, change our plans,

shop, cook and clean to see to the comfort of our guests. The interruption also puts us in a precarious position because we have to make the guest comfortable while we also maintain order in the house. Hospitality can be a burden. At the same time it can also be a gift. The guest brings a fresh energy, new ideas, another perspective, new stories and jokes and the time together creates new memories. Hospitality brings us face to face with the Other. And it is in the face to face encounter where we may locate an ethics of responsibility according to the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The naked face is defenseless. It says without words: "Thou shall not kill." Levinas understands the face to face encounter to be the creation of an ethical space that includes all of humanity. Between the one and the other stands all of humanity. An invisible, but still present humankind, makes a human demand. For Levinas the demand is a responsibility for the Other. I say the responsibility is with the Other. It is a shared responsibility. Host and guest both have moral obligations. The obligation of the host is generosity; the obligation of the guest is gratitude. And the concept helps us to know that we all are both host and guest. It is a relationship of *differance* with an A. Differance tells us that one is the other at a different moment in time and space. The host at another place and at another time will be the guest and the guest will at some point be the host.

In the passage from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus instructs us to ask, to seek and to knock, we are the wayfaring strangers wondering through a world of woe. The question becomes what are we asking for? What are we searching for? What door are we knocking on and why? Are we asking for this or that job? This or that companion? Are we asking for healing for body, mind or soul? Are we asking to win the lottery? Are we searching for an answer to some personal riddle that keeps us awake at night? Are we searching for just a little peace of mind? Are we searching for something, anything that will take the hurt away and wash away all the memories of the pain? Are we searching for the end of a loneliness that is its own chronic ache? Are we going from door to door looking for the one that will open to a space that feels like home?

Jesus assures us that if we ask we will receive, if we search we will find, if we knock the door will be open unto us. We, who at this moment are the guests, will find our fulfillment from God, the divine gracious parent and host. We will receive the answers to our questions, the end of our search, the open door when we enter into God. And God in his triune dimensions is also a seeker. While we are searching and finding what we need when we enter into God, God is seeking us. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well: "the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." (John 4: 23) Worship now becomes an event in the sense that John Caputo imagines, the happening that is and that is coming. Jesus says in The Revelation: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." (Revelation 3: 20) Jesus is asking, seeking, knocking. At this moment, he is the guest and we are the host.

Jesus is the human incarnation of the Divine Love of God. John Wesley taught that to love is the perfection of the Christian. Here perfection does not mean without flaw or error. It means complete. The believer is called to love as Jesus loved. They will know that we are Christians by our love. (John 13:35) And this love is a love that is a welcoming love, a love brave enough to open the door to strangers and wanderers who may or may not wish us ill and do us harm. We love enough to take the risk. We love enough to love the sick in body, soul and mind, to tend to their various kinds of illness with faith and gratitude knowing that there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. We are both host and guest loving enough to live the Golden Rule that is also found in this scripture passage.

The imperative that Jesus gives is not unlike the Kantian categorical imperative that says: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." The consequences do not matter. The righteousness of the demand is the only consideration.

Similarly, when Jesus says IN EVERYTHING we ought to do to others what we would have them do to us, he is dancing the dance of *differance* knowing full well that we are the Other at a different moment in time and space. We will be in the position of the Other, so we ought to put ourselves in that position through the power of an expanded moral imagination before we act. This is the same logic behind the command to love our neighbors as ourselves because the truth of the matter is that our neighbor is us. They are another part of us. It is the present reality of Interbeing. We are able to see this when we have entered into the presence of God and when God has entered into us. Both we and God have become host and guest. We have become both giver and receiver. We have become lover and the beloved.

This is possible through the power and the force of love, of radical, fierce, uncompromising, unconditional, wide-open love. This is the love that Martin Luther King Jr speaks about when he describes the beloved community. For King the beloved community was at once the means and the ends of a nonviolent struggle for justice. He said: "Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives" (An Experiment in Love 19).

We project this ethic through the logic of hospitality. We welcome the love of God into the center of our lives and in so doing, God welcomes us into God's own heart. This leaves us with a responsibility toward both generosity and gratitude. This means unceasing prayer, praise and thanksgiving, according to Wesley. Unceasing prayer puts us in unceasing communication with God. And, God inhabits the praise of God's people. (Psalm 22:3) When we shout hallelujah or hallelujah anyhow, we are opening the door to allow God into our situation. We host God through praise. When we give God thanks, we are fulfilling the obligation of the guest. Praise and thanks giving makes us happy.

Even popular culture recognizes this fact: Judy Garland sings: “Forget your troubles come on get happy. You better chase all you cares away. Shout Hallelujah; come on get happy Get ready for the judgment day.” Prayer, praise and thanksgiving are disciplines, but they are disciplines that allow God to live, to exist as radical love at the center of our lives. These disciplines constitute an event that is and that is also on the way. It is a deed, a purposeful act. We ought to pray and give praise and thanks giving whether we feel like it or not. The act of will opens the door to God and God’s love is an interruption. It is the divine moving into our mundane space, causing us to make the necessary accommodation. Prayer, praise and thanksgiving are also acts of faith. It is faith in the eternal now and in the not yet. King says: “the believer in nonviolence has deep faith in the future. This faith is another reason why the nonviolent resister can accept suffering without retaliation. For he knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. It is true that there are devout believers in nonviolence who find it difficult to believe in a personal God. But even these persons believe in the existence of some creative force that works for universal wholeness. Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole” (20).

This is the work of the church—to be the hands and feet of the Spirit that is God, that is Divine Love in height and breadth and depth —Father, Son, and Mother Holy Spirit. And on this occasion, on the event of the installation of Rev. Juan Manuel Santiago-Rodriguez, we are celebrating the necessary public ritual that puts him in place. We are celebrating the feast that is and that will be his leadership. We are celebrating the hospitality of this beloved community that welcomes him as host and guest. We are celebrating friendship/ leadership because Jesus said:” I no longer call you servants. . .but I call you friend.” (John 15:15) And this beloved community will be the open door, the welcome, the host to a new world that is coming.

Nina Simone sings: "There's a new world coming and it's just around the bend. There's a new world coming. This one's coming to an end. There's a new voice calling and you can hear it if you try and its growing stronger with every day that passes by. There's a brand new morning rising sweet and free and clear. There's a new day dawning that belongs to you and me. Yes a new world's coming the one we've had visions of and its coming in peace, coming in joy, coming in love."

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