

The Empty Chair
Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 25:31-46
November 20, 2005

When I go to a new church, I'm often grateful that my seat is usually designated, for I wouldn't want to sit in someone else's seat! From where I sit, I notice a pattern in nearly every church: people tend to sit in the same seats Sunday after Sunday. From my perspective, it's a helpful way of taking mental attendance. When I realize that someone hasn't been sitting in their usual place for a while, I try to give them a call to let them know they have been missed.

Experts who coach churches in growth and welcoming new people talk about the comfort level of the worship space. We know that people like their personal space, so that even though we might be able to fit six or seven people in a pew, if we sat that way all the time, it could feel uncomfortable or crowded. New people who come into a sanctuary that is uncomfortably full might sense that there is no room left for them and not return. When a church approaches the point of being uncomfortably full, it is time to consider starting an additional worship service or enlarging the worship space to make room for more people. What a great problem to have!

The lesson is to make sure there is always room for at least one more person, to have an empty chair, as if to say, "We're glad you came. We've been expecting you!"

On Thanksgiving Day many of us will sit down at tables overflowing with the bounty God has provided. Some of us will have an empty chair representing someone who is not with us, a relative who lives at a distance and cannot be present, or perhaps a loved one who has died.

For many families an empty chair was part of their traditional Sunday dinner. The empty chair stood ready to be filled by someone who dropped by unexpectedly. Even if there wasn't an actual "empty chair," there were always an extra plate and extra portions for the unexpected guest. The empty chair stood as a reminder that no matter how many were present, there was always room for one more.

The empty chair is also a fixture at the greatest Jewish thanksgiving feast of the year, the Passover Seder. An empty chair at the Seder table and a front door left slightly ajar symbolically welcome the prophet Elijah to return to join in the feast.

Lifestyles have changed and families have moved geographically farther and farther apart. Sunday dinner is not a tradition that many of us keep any more due to time constraints and distance. As families move

emotionally distant from one another due to estrangement, wounds of the past, or differences of opinion, it is sometimes difficult for the whole clan “gather at Grandma’s” for the Thanksgiving feast. Regardless of how large or small our Thanksgiving feast or Sunday dinner, the tradition of the empty chair commends itself to our consideration—if not physically, then at least spiritually.

The empty chair reminds us to share our bounty with others. I am always touched when I hear the life stories of older adults who lived through the Depression. They remember that even in the midst of those difficult times, there was always food to share. The door was always open to a stranger who happened to wander by at mealtime needing some nourishment. Even in the midst of their own poverty, there was a great spirit of generosity.

This year from the Southeast Asia tsunami to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to the South Asia Earthquake we have had reminders to share our bounty with others, and the world has responded generously. There is concern, however, that we’ve approached ‘donor fatigue’ or ‘compassion fatigue.’ The needs have become so many and each of them so great that it has become overwhelming. It is often easier to crawl back into our own safe, cozy comfort zone and forget the millions who are suffering without even a portion of what we have. It is easy to give from our discretionary income, but it is more difficult to give sacrificially, for that usually requires dramatic lifestyle changes.

Beyond material gifts, the empty chair calls us to care for others. An empty chair reminds us to expand our circle of concern and extend a hand to someone who is not yet included. Several resources on small group ministries encourage groups to set up at least one more chair than there are members of the group. That chair is to be a reminder of who is not present but who should and needs to be part of a caring community of love. The empty chair stands as an encouragement to members to invite someone to fill that chair the next session.

In addition to food, clothing, and shelter, people need human companionship. We need one another. We need a safe place to sit and to be ourselves, to tell our stories and be heard, to share our pain and receive empathy. The empty chair, whether it be around our dinner table, in our living room or office, in our sanctuary, says to another, “You are welcome here. Come in, sit down and share your life with us. We will listen, weep and laugh together with you.”

The empty chair reminds us not simply to give, but also to receive—to receive one another as gifts. In welcoming the stranger, we may be

surprised to find a new friend. Our willingness to receive from even the neediest person opens a door of hope for them. It enables them to fulfill their need to give. But even more, it can truly be a gift to us. Guests carry precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host. In receiving others as gifts, we in turn receive of their care, concern, and love. They become instruments of grace to us.

The empty chair is a symbol for the ministry of hospitality. Hospitality is the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality does not seek to change, confine, or manipulate people. It welcomes them into a free, safe place where conversation may indeed happen. It's a welcoming invitation to find God and perhaps to find a new way of life.

St. Benedict lived in the sixth century at a time like ours, when Christians struggled to make sense of life in a troubled society. Benedict established a community with a rule of life to model an alternative to the ways of the world. Their withdrawal was not so much a denial or rejection of the world; it was for the purpose of equipping themselves for service in the world. Their community life was modeled upon the hospitality of God, who calls us into relationship and gives generously to fulfill our deepest longings. Benedict made it clear that people do not enter our lives to be coerced or manipulated, but to enrich us by their differences, and to be graciously received in the name of Christ.

The sharing of Christian hospitality with strangers receives strong emphasis in Benedict's Rule. He instructs that:

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."... Proper honor must be shown to all....Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love....All humility should be shown in addressing a guest on arrival and departure. By a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them....Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly is Christ received.¹

As Benedict sought to provide an alternative to the way of a world bitterly divided and hostile, the body of Christ in our time is called to offer such an alternative. At a time when the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" has grown so large, we are called to build a bridge and embrace the stranger. At a time when our nation is so politically divided, the church

can be a model of hospitality, of receiving one another as Christ, at the minimum with decency and respect, if not tolerance and love.

Unfortunately at this moment, the United Methodist Church is struggling in its ministry of hospitality. Last year a gay man actively participating in the life of a United Methodist Church in Virginia asked to have his membership transferred from another denomination. He was willing to take the vows of membership; however, because of his sexual orientation, the pastor refused him membership. The situation was reported to church authorities and the Bishop told the pastor that he was required to receive into membership anyone who was willing to affirm the vows of membership. The pastor was put on suspension.

The actions were taken to the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, the body given authority to interpret the law of the church, like our nation's Supreme Court. On October 29, the Judicial Council ruled that pastors are not mandated to receive all persons regardless of their willingness to affirm membership vows. Thus, the pastor's refusal of church membership to the man in Virginia was upheld.

This incident is creating much upheaval and pain within our larger church. The Bishops of the Church have issued a pastoral letter, which our Bishop has asked us to read. Copies of the full text are available in the Fellowship Hall. In a portion of the letter, the Bishops write:

The United Methodist Church is committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ with all people. We, the bishops of the Church, uphold and affirm that the General Conference has clearly spoken through the denomination's Constitution on inclusiveness and justice for all as it relates to church membership:

"The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking the vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection." (Article IV, Constitution of The United Methodist Church)

We believe the ministry of the local church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is to help people accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We call upon United Methodist pastors and laity to make every congregation a community of hospitality.²

The bishop of our California-Nevada Conference, Beverly Shamana, has written:

As United Methodists we believe that Christ invites all persons to His church and His table without reservation or barrier. Sincere faith and a desire to seek and know Christ are the only criteria. As one who has known exclusion because of race and gender, I grieve for the man who was denied membership in the church. I am in prayer for our church that we may not see the erroneous action of one pastor as a license to deny membership based on individual and personal criteria.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the issue of homosexuality has been a source of conflict in this and every mainline Protestant denomination in recent years. We are not of one mind on this issue. In this congregation we have members who hold different perspectives on the matter. And yet, in this local church, you have maintained a respect for one another and a tolerance for differing opinions. This congregation is a model of inclusiveness, where we may agree to disagree, but where all are welcome at the table. All are welcomed as Christ and an empty chair is ready to receive whomever enters the house of the Lord. Guests and hosts alike are met with the courtesy of love.

My hope is that even in the face of the Judicial Council ruling, this congregation will continue to be a model of inclusiveness, where the sole criteria for membership are sincere faith in God and a desire to know and follow Jesus Christ. My hope is that there will always be an empty chair available to welcome the stranger, a chair through which we can share our bounty, express our care, and receive the gifts of another.

Nat Hentoff tells about a tour of the Middle East taken by jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie and his racially mixed band. The U.S. Ambassador to Turkey invited them to play at a lawn party he was hosting for local dignitaries and important Americans in the city of Ankara.

When Dizzy arrived at the party, he noticed that there was a large fence around the lawn where the party was taking place. Outside the fence, there were quite a number of street kids, with their noses pressed up against the fence. It was clear that they wanted to come inside to listen to the music. One little boy did make it over the top of the fence, but a guard forced him back over to the outside.

Dizzy wanted to know why the children were being kept out. An official replied that the party and its music were only intended for “select people.” That rubbed Dizzy Gillespie in exactly the wrong way. “Select

people!” he replied. “We’re not over here for select people. We’re over here to show these people that all kinds of people are Americans.”

The Ambassador became anxious. “The guests are waiting for you to play,” he said to Gillespie, “are you going to do that?” “No,” said Gillespie, in measured tones. “I’m not going to play. What we are here for is to get close to people who are outside the fence.” Finally the Ambassador relented. The gates were opened and all the “urchins,” as Dizzy referred to them, were welcomed inside the fence. It turned out to be a great party—one that made the headlines in the paper the next day.³

As we enter into this holiday season, let us give thanks for the hospitality of a gracious God who warmly welcomes us into the very heart of God and graces us with bountiful gifts. Let us also look beyond ourselves, for this time which we romanticize as the most joyous of the year, is also the loneliest, most painful season for many. Let’s set out empty chairs around our tables, in our sanctuary, and within our hearts to welcome the stranger, to entertain the unexpected guest, to make room for one more. Let us prepare our hearts to meet Christ in one another.

¹ *Abridged Edition of the Rule of St. Benedict 1980*, chapter 54, p. 103f. Quoted by Elizabeth J. Canham, "A School for the Lord's Service," *Weavings*, January/February 1994.

² Full texts of the Pastoral Letter from the Council of Bishops and a letter from Bishop Shamana may be found at www.cnumc.org.

³ Rev. Ron Dunn, San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church, www.gbqm-umc.org/sanramonvalley. Confirmed at www.jerryjazzmusician.com, March 19, 2004 conversation with Nat Hentoff. Retrieved November 19, 2005.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, California