

From Strangers to Neighbors

By Rev. Chris Rice

Dear Friends,

God has given us this day as a gift, and we dare not waste our time by not asking Him to lead us in doing His will. The Word of God tells us to “contribute to the needs of the saints” and “practice hospitality” (Rom. 12:13), and the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia* or literally “love for stranger”. The same word is used in Hebrews 13:2 which says, “Do not neglect hospitality, for in doing this some have entertained angels unawares.” I want to take some time to look deeply into who we are at NLEC, our mission, values, and expression, and then look at what it means to show hospitality and move from being strangers, to being neighbors in our community. But first, let’s pray:

“Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*” (*Book of Common Prayer, pg. 826*)

The **mission** of New Life Evangelistic Center (NLEC) is to provide Christian hospitality and respect for life through the services of food, clothing, shelter, education, and job training programs, as well as physical, mental and spiritual health care, to the poor and homeless in Saint Louis and beyond.

Because of the love of Jesus Christ displayed on the cross, and His Spirit alive in us our **values** are empathy, advocacy, empowerment, dignity, responsibility, faith, hope, and love.

This is our particular expression: Hospitality flows out of our worship. We gather for morning Bible Studies every weekday. We practice a fast on Wednesdays until dinner and gather for prayer and the communion. We hold worship on Friday afternoons at 3:30pm. Our church is independent and interdenominational. Members are free to attend their home church on Sunday mornings.

Our members live in community together, working and living together on site. The ministry provides full room and board in return for voluntary service. We offer a variety of program time commitments from 30 days up to 2 years and longer. Some former members become paid staff or continue to volunteer full time even while living in their own apartments.

This expression seems really strange to many people. Even though we invest a lot of time and energy in helping the public understand what we do, through our use of the internet, TV, radio, and phone calls, it’s just so different that we get accused of being many things that we just aren’t. People can’t conceive of a church actually sheltering homeless people in its building, or marching to advocate for the homeless, because they’ve never heard of churches in this area doing that. This is not just a local problem, however.

Dr. Cornel West says that American religious life is in a crisis. “American religious life---despite its weekly rituals and everyday practices---is shot through with existential emptiness. This emptiness---or lack of spiritual depth---results from the excessive preoccupation with isolated personal interests and atomistic

individual concerns... Like so much of American culture, exorbitant personalistic and individualistic preoccupations in American religion yield momentary stimulation rather than spiritual sustenance, sentimental self-flagellation rather than sacrificial self-denial." (THE CORNELL WEST READER, *The Crisis in Contemporary American Religion*, pg. 357-8.)

Our context as a Christian community lies within a very selfish cultural ethos. We must struggle to lay down our egos in a world that does not understand the value of a gift or the true nature of hospitality. This selfishness directly effects our impact on the world.

Dr. West writes: "Moralistic acts are often conflated with moral actions. Yet the former proceed from sheer sentimental concern---for example, pity---whereas the latter flow from an understanding of the larger context in which the action takes place and of the impact of the action on the problem. In short, moralistic acts rest upon a narrow, parochial and intellectualism that sees only pitiful individuals, whereas moral action is based on a broad, robust prophetism that highlights systemic social analysis of the circumstances under which tragic persons struggle. . ." It is completely acceptable to show pity to the poor, unless of course we hold the system that creates poverty morally accountable.

In living by our mission, we must understand why poverty is so bad, and why we our faith does not allow us to leave the homeless without shelter, without food, clothing, medical care, and advocacy. Gustavo Gutierrez says that poverty according to the Scriptures is by its very definition a degrading human situation. It means to beg, weak, frail, bent over, humble. Poverty is a climate of indignation. "In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God. This rejection of poverty is seen very clearly in the vocabulary used... The climate in which poverty is described is one of indignation. And it is with the same indignation that the cause of poverty is indicated: the injustice of oppressors."

Michael Harrington pointed out in his book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, that poverty is more hidden in America, by its landscape, by the freedoms we all enjoy, and by the collective expectation that none of us really has to be poor for very long because the system works (Scribner, NY, 1962, 1969, 1981, See Chapter 1). When we hear that poverty is destitution, that it's slavery, and that it betrays our humanity, many may speak up and say, "Oh, no, it's not really as bad as all that." When you live without for so long you become tempted to live within your norms, no matter how deplorable they may be. Kind of like a man who works hard every day and then comes home and never cleans his house. The dishes pile up, the laundry piles up, the trash piles up, he stops inviting friends over, and he just gives up cleaning. Being poor and hiding it makes it really hard to change the situation, but this denial of reality betrays our humanity.

Gutierrez wrote that poverty "contradicts the meaning of the mosaic religion, which was the elimination of servitude and indebtedness". It stands "against the mandate of Genesis" that we are made in the image of our creator and that we are given the work of transforming nature to His glory. Finally, we cannot forget that we humans are the sacrament of God. "We meet God in our encounter with other persons; what is done for others is done for the Lord. In a word, the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among persons and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of a sin, that is, of a negation of love. It is therefore incompatible with the coining of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of love and justice." (Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Orbis Books, 1973.)

How then, within Christ's Kingdom of Love, do we respond to poverty? Gutierrez says, "Only by rejecting poverty and by making itself poor in order to protest against it can the Church preach something that is uniquely its own: "spiritual poverty," that is, the openness of humankind and history to the future promised by God. Only in this way will the Church be able to fulfill authentically— and with any possibility of being listened to—its prophetic function of denouncing every human injustice. And only in this way will it be able to preach the word which liberates, the word of genuine fellowship."

People who live and journey with us for a time often wonder why we're always struggling to pay bills. Why don't we have more money? Why such precarity? Why not keep some of the money and spend more on a nicer place and bigger salaries? The answer is clear in the Scriptures. Wealth, when it is not for God, becomes a trap. It becomes about power, security, and recognition. When you seek those things you become part of the same system that enslaves humans into poverty. (See Luke 12:21)

Our most honest answer to Jesus when he tells us to welcome strangers and to love our neighbors should be, "Lord, help us! We can't do this on our own. We believe, but help our unbelief!" We are a testament to the grace of God, to the miraculous in the midst of the mundane. God uses sinful people, saved by His Grace, to accomplish his purpose in this world.

The task before us, making strangers into neighbors, seems impossible. How do we make apathetic people care? How do we make rich people look the poor in the face instead of ignoring them and passing them by, or worse calling the cops on them to get them removed out of sight out of mind? How do we keep the poor from harming themselves or others in their despair? Jesus said that the answer is not in retaliation or despair.

"You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. 'But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.." (Matt. 5:38-48, NRSV)

My initial reaction is "If I give to all who ask of me, what's left of me?" Verse forty-two is often not taken seriously by people outside or inside the church. The fear is that turning the other cheek and giving to all who ask will leave us as emasculated pushovers. We should understand however, that the words assume that with God as our Father, our livelihood, including our safety and possessions, are secured. This allows us to turn the other cheek and give to all who ask of us. It also guards us against giving into the enemy or giving away so much that we bring dishonor to ourselves and him. It does not, however, protect our reputation in this world.

I believe that Downtown Saint Louis needs a movement of awakened Christians to lead us from the hostility and division, the name-calling and misunderstanding between strangers living in proximity, into an understanding that we are indeed neighbors regardless of property ownership and income levels. I

believe that this fits the calling of our churches and that together we can accomplish. This requires, however, that we invite one another to more gatherings. That we speak to one another and of one another not in terms of our problems, but as equals. This will take great courage.

Henri JM Nouwen wrote in his book, *The Wounded Healer* that the necessary precondition in showing hospitality is concentration. We have to discover our center. It's not possible, for instance, to hang out in the bar on Washington Avenue until 3:00am and then get up at 8:00am and come to a neighborhood meeting to make a better world. He wrote, "Those who want to pay attention without intention have to be at home in their own house—that is, they have to discover the center of their lives in their own hearts. Concentration, which leads to meditation and contemplation, is therefore the necessary precondition for true hospitality. When our souls are restless, when we are driven by thousands of different and often conflicting stimuli, when we are always "over there" between people, ideas, and the worries of this world, how can we possibly create the room and space where others can enter freely without feeling themselves unlawful intruders?"

It is only in the love of Christ that we find the freedom to welcome strangers. Nouwen again, "This experience tells us that we can only love because we are born out of love, that we can only give because our life is a gift, and that we can only make others free because we are set free by the One whose heart is greater than our own. And when we have finally found the anchor place for our lives within our own center we can be free to let others enter into the space created for them, and allow them to dance their own dance, sing their own song, and speak their own language without fear. Then our presence is no longer threatening and demanding, but inviting and liberating."

The second thing needed in hospitality is community. Many people don't understand that giving aid is not actually a virtue unless the recipient is free to accept or decline the gift. Our task is not simply to volunteer and to give, but to receive and create spaces of welcome. Nouwen said, "The paradox indeed is that hospitality asks for the creation of an empty space, where the guests can find their own souls. Why is this a healing ministry? It is healing because it takes away the false illusion that wholeness can be given by one to another. It is healing because it does not take away the loneliness and the pain of others, but invites them to recognize their loneliness on a level where it can be shared. Many people in this life suffer because they are anxiously searching for the man or woman, the event or encounter, which will take their loneliness away. But when they enter a house with real hospitality they soon see that their own wounds must be understood, not as sources of despair and bitterness, but as signs that they have to travel on in obedience to the calling sounds of those wounds." (*The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, pgs. 95-106)

What we're looking at here is so much more alive than keeping our nonprofits active, our streets safe, and clients located in the right facilities. The power of the gospel is freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, resurrection of the dead into a new heavens and earth! But our problem is that our churches are not places of welcome for the disinherited. We must pray for reformation, for revival, to become true followers of Jesus Christ!

Vincent Harding wrote in his Foreword to Howard Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "Today, at the close of Thurman's century, those people who live most obviously with their backs against the wall—for instance, the homeless, the working and jobless poor, the substance abused and abusers, the alienated, misguided, and essentially abandoned young people—are rarely within hearing or seeing range of the company of Jesus' proclaimed followers. The keepers of the faith of the master often find it

very difficult, and very dangerous, to follow him into the hard places inhabited by the disinherited of America. And those wall-bruised people find no space for their presence in the places where the official followers are comfortably at worship, unless they happen to find themselves among such exceptions as the young, downwardly mobile worker..." (pgs. 23-24, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, 1976, 1996)

No matter who we are, it can become easy to settle into our daily expectations, and to see others only in terms of how they may help us achieve our goals. There is really no reason for recognition, neighborliness, reconciliation, and justice if we lose sight of God's will. When we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. day every year with parades and speeches and community service days, but we exclude one another from our prayers and from our shared spaces, we have lost sight of our goal.

Harding said, "There's a lesson for us: If we lock up Martin Luther King, and make him unavailable for where we are now so we can keep ourselves comfortably distant from the realities he was trying to grapple with, we waste King. All of us are being called beyond those comfortable places where it's easy to be Christian. That's the key for the 21st century – to answer the voice within us, as it was within Martin, which says 'do something for somebody.' We can learn to play on locked pianos and to dream of worlds that do not yet exist." ("King for the 21st Century Calls Us to walk with Jesus", <http://www.goshen.edu/news/2005/01/21/vincent-harding-king-for-the-21st-century-calls-us-to-walk-with-jesus-2/>)

In North Carolina faith communities create spaces of welcome to immigrant communities in a "Stranger to Neighbor" program. Would it be possible to adapt that program for use here in our own neighborhoods? Who would participate? We can't dream for something different by licking our wounds and begging to be understood. We have to rise up, realize who we are in Christ, and do the unexpected knowing that may not be popular, but it is important. (See <http://faithaction.org/programs/strangertoneighbor-congregations/>)

Let's go to the Lord in prayer:

Heavenly Father, you provide us with every good and perfect gift, and you have taught us that we are blessed when we empty ourselves so that you might fill us. We come to you trusting that you have a future in mind for us that exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. We want to love you with our whole hearts, minds, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Teach us to trust you, and to accept all that you would accomplish in us. For the sake of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Yours in Christ

Rev. Chris Rice