

“Travel Light”

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2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Mark 6:1-13

Would you rather be a guest, or a host? Take a minute to talk to a neighbor, and share a time when you recently experienced being a guest or a host, and what that was like.

As many of you may be traveling this summer, I imagine some of you may experience being a guest of a relative, or family member, or AirBnB host. Being a guest is a bit different than staying at a hotel. As a guest, you may think of bringing a gift for your host. As a guest, you hope that what you can offer in terms of being good company—telling good stories, playing with their kids, helping out with a project—is worth any way your presence might burden your host.

We were recently invited as guests to a party in the Hamptons by someone who is more of an acquaintance than a close friend. The host also generously offered to let us stay over for the night, since we were coming from so far away. The house, with its blooming gardens and saltwater pool, was incredible. Each room looked like it was decorated from a museum; each piece of furniture a work of joyful, modern art. Even the *smell* of the house felt bespoke. And indeed, in the coming week, photographers would be coming out because the house was to be featured in a design magazine. We had a lovely time at the party, and met some interesting people. But when the party was over, we decided we would take a walk on the beach and then head back to our own, cozy but certainly not museum-quality home. We weren't ready for the awkward vulnerability that comes with being a guest of someone you don't know too well.

But as much as it can be a burden, hosting can also be a delight. Last weekend, when my street had a block party, we saw the children of the street— who had mostly kept to themselves and their families, and played in their own yards— had coalesced into a multi-age pack as they paraded through the neighborhood. I

was back in the house working on my sermon when suddenly all the children of the block were in my kitchen eating snacks, and then they were on to the next house, only to circle back to our house again and again. Crossing the threshold of our home was a sign that they had crossed into more familiar territory with one another, and I hope that through the children of the neighborhood, the parents will grow closer in connection with one another, too.

Another delight comes from time to time when one of our volunteer English Conversation teachers invites their class into their home for a meal or a visit. Often, this will be the first time many of the students have been inside the home of a US-born English speaker, and they show great curiosity for how the host has set up their home and what foods they serve. They notice the customs (shoes on or off?) and take pictures. When I have hosted the family English Conversation Class, I have often been gifted with tasty Japanese and Korean treats I have never tried before. For both the host and the guest, the experience they share builds a new level of intimacy and connection, and it can even be life-changing.

I believe a few of you were around the time our church— years before I arrived— hosted youth from Uganda, as they traveled on a musical tour. I have heard from church lore that one of these youth, who wanted a change from his own life and did not want to return to his home country, went on a daring escapade.

Jesus understood this possibility for transformation when he commissioned his disciples into ministry. He asked his disciples to lean into that awkward, vulnerable zone of being a guest. Instead of preparing the perfect gift to offer their hosts, Jesus instructed them to come with nothing: no wallet, no food to offer, no baggage. Travel light, he told them, putting the disciples in a position where they would be completely reliant on their hosts for their care.

There are times when I did enter that awkward vulnerability of being a guest. When I was in high school, as a rising Senior I went on our church choir tour to New York City. It was my first time to New York, and we sang our way up the East Coast to get there, each night staying in a different town and singing for our supper. We suburban Atlanta kids would go, two by two, into homes of the church members that hosted us. I remember one home in particular, in rural Pennsylvania. We slept on a sofa bed in the basement. On the wood-paneled walls hung the largest rack of guns I had seen in my life, and mounted to those

same walls, the head of every kind of woodland creature stared down at us with sad, watchful eyes as we tried to sleep. The birkenstock-clad, Princeton educated pastor of that congregation wore a tie-dyed peace T-shirt and seemed kind of a mismatch with her blue collar, gun toting congregants. But I could see a genuine love and respect for her congregants that was a witness to me of how Jesus can call us to serve and be transformed by all different types of people.

When I was in college, I studied abroad in Beijing. On our fall break, I signed up for a government-sponsored chance to stay on a farm in the countryside. The family that hosted me was of simple means and did not speak English, and my Chinese language study had just begun weeks ago. So we communicated through gestures. The woman and man of the house generously gave my classmate and me their room to sleep in. I learned how to make jiaozi (dumplings) side by side with the woman of the house and her son. And I was asked to help out on the farm, using a sickle to clear away last season's crops to prepare for the next planting. I am not sure how typical a family this was, considering the visit was curated by the Chinese government. That said, I think I learned way more about China from that three-day stay on the farm than I did in a month's worth of classroom study; the vulnerability of being a guest opened me up to seeing the culture and experiencing the language more fully.

It's one thing to do a deep dive into being a guest in a home and culture that is entirely new. But at the end of the month, I will spend a month on a beach vacation with my family. I'm really looking forward to it; I love my family, and we don't get to see each other enough since they all live down south. The week immediately following, we will spend a beach week with my spouse's' side of the family— 7 of us sharing a 2-bedroom rental. Chris and I are both younger siblings, and while we love them both deeply and consider them among our best friends, we both recognize how our elder sisters know how to press our buttons like no other person can— and we probably can press theirs, too.

When Jesus arrived in his hometown, they did not see him with the fresh eyes others around Judea saw him. When he began preaching in the synagogue of his youth, his words astounded the people. But their amazement then shifted to suspicion, as they questioned,

“Where did he come up with all this?”

“What wisdom has been given to him?”

“What deeds of power are being done by his hands?”

“Isn’t this the carpenter, Mary’s boy? Aren’t these his brothers and sisters?”

And they were offended by him.

They thought they knew the place he had earned, a niche grooved in their minds based on how they saw him as a child move in the world. They had no room in their minds to conceive that he could become something else. I find a little comfort in the fact that Jesus sent his own disciples out to do something that even he could not succeed in with his own hometown. It reminds me that my role is to deliver the message faithfully, but that I cannot control the outcome of how people receive it.

Even though there would be no way the disciples could repay their hosts for their hospitality in terms of money, food, or the perfect host gift, they did have a pretty amazing story to share. It is the story of God’s love, made present in human flesh. It is a story that can offer healing and transformation. I think there is something about the tending of bodily needs— a place to sleep, food to eat, care for the body— that prepares a space within you for the welcome of Christ himself, who came into the world as a vulnerable infant under political persecution, left the world in a wounded body, also under political persecution, and returned to the world in a resurrected body, overturning the powers that seek to oppress and do harm.

In a few minutes, we will receive the invitation to eat from Christ’s table. When Christ sets the table, he hosts us in a way that transforms our bodies, with a meal that tends to our physical hunger and thirst, but also our spiritual hunger and thirst. When we become guests at Christ’s table, we leave as hosts, because the spirit of Christ has become embodied within us. Walking with that presence, there is not a lot extra we need to carry. We have what we need.