

The Church in the 21st Century
Welcoming the Stranger
John 1:10-11
Sunday, February 17, 2019

In a recent *Philosophy of Religion Journal*, a well-known critic of religion made a remarkable comment about the significance of the Judeo-Christian Religion, regarding the cultures in which these religions flourished. He said that wherever the Christian religion has gone, it has provided two important contributions that have survived, even beyond any damage it might have done to culture. Those two characteristics are responsibility and hospitality. Wherever Christianity has left its mark these two positive forces of human nature have been raised to the level of the good and the right, providing a grounding of ethics and spirituality. They have provided a shield against self-righteousness and a challenge to indifference.

The church at the beginning of the 21st century would do well to listen to this old agnostic philosopher who is moving closer to the heart of spirituality. The church for centuries has been trying to get back to the beginning of its spiritual birth, believing that it has lost its way. We can hear the echoes of every generation saying, “Let’s get back to the early church” or “What would Jesus do?” These questions are attempts at trying to get back to the beginning. But we often overthink what it is we lost, especially when we retreat back through the facility or our doctrinal and creedal history, rather than through our basic foundation of relationships with each other and God. Jesus was anything but a doctrinaire. Instead he was relational. He sought to build a community that did not operate on the same old principles of power and human manipulation. He wanted to move beyond the emotional outbursts of power that would defeat the avenue of love and truth. Jesus wanted to help the world grow up into the patience and deference of hospitality, respect and responsibility. If the church wants to make an impact in the world, then it needs to find a way to embody this aspect of Jesus’ life; not only in personal relationships but in the world of politics and professional relationships.

We are on the brink of a dangerously divided country and a divided church. But we have forgotten that Jesus himself came into a world that didn’t want him, because it was divided for the same reasons we

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are divided today. John reminds us, *“He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn’t even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn’t want him.”* But that didn’t stop him. In fact it compelled him even more deeply to move into the world of division and judgment to help it realize that hospitality is more useful for our spiritual life than exclusion.

All forms of hospitality are linked to invitation. We must invite people into our life, into our failures and into our irrationality. When we invite people and God into our life we invite them to suffer with us and to work out the world with us. Jesus invited the world into his life. He invited all of us to see ourselves through his eyes. But when we don’t we fail. We fail the command of hospitality, a failure that was on the head of all those who worked to defeat Jesus and his ministry, when we forget the Christ child.

The failure of the church is not because we have left our doctrinal purity or because we have failed to speak out against the culture. The church has failed because it has failed to show respect to the stranger. It has failed because we have left the streets for our homes without inviting others to come with us. The church has failed because, in an hour when the church should provide leadership, we are heard praising the voices of the politicians of hatred. We wonder why people are not embracing the church. It is simple. We are not embracing the victims of the powerful. They are asking us, “Can you show me Jesus?”

Jesus was a stranger and so are we. We make strangers of others every time we disrespect them, and every time we dismiss them because we can’t get over ourselves. It is time to get over ourselves, go out in the streets and show people the power of Jesus. When we do, we might see the slow pilgrimage of the un-churched coming back. They will come back because they see the church as a haven against the backbiting and evils of the world. They will come back because they want to be filled up with Jesus and this is where they can do it. They will come back because we have invited them by our hospitality, which is really our love for them in action.

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