

Chapter Eleven

Creating Space and Making Room

Mount Vernon Nazarene University

Commencement Address

During one Christmas season while Anne and I served at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, we spent a fascinating evening in Columbus with two MVNU alumni. We walked to a nearby restaurant to purchase some Chinese food. We ate the meal by candlelight while sitting on the floor in a circle.

The meal was great. The two-to three-hour discussion was phenomenal. And, what a great blessing to Anne and me as well as to the other couple! Sharing our meal. Sharing our time. Sharing our journey. During the evening, Anne and I experienced what the Bible refers to as hospitality.

I spent a sabbatical semester at Yale University Divinity School in 1999 working through the personal library/collection of the late Roman Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen. His writings challenged me to increasingly think about the relationship of spiritual hospitality to Christian leadership. We must model biblical hospitality before we mentor others in its practice.

How do we **create space and make room** (practice 'hospitality') on the job or in our home, especially when we experience conflict and even collision between good and godly people over our vision and values?

This practice of hospitality was a way of life fundamental to Christian identity for seventeen hundred years of the Christian church. Christine Pohl convincingly documents this practice in her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality in Christian Tradition* (1999). In this 2009 commencement service, I want to challenge you to embrace the rich concept of spiritual hospitality in your leadership responsibilities. It has the potential of transforming relationships with those individuals with whom you live and work.

Biblically and theologically, the term hospitality is not limited to receiving a stranger into our homes – although it surely includes this dimension. Fundamentally, it is a core attitude toward others, which can be expressed by a great variety of behaviors.

Hospitality, biblically understood, challenges us to relate to others as if we were relating to Christ Himself.

Hospitality primarily means the creation of free space – making room, to use Pohl’s words, in the midst of differences of thought or behaviors that may exist. With this perspective, the attitude of hospitality helps us to make room or create space for those with whom we live and work. The strange and the stranger can enter and become a friend. It is being to others with whom you live and work, a living witness of the risen Christ.

The gift of Christian hospitality is the opportunity we provide for the colleague, co-worker, guest, stranger, family member or friend to find her or his own way. It enables us to consider an alternative way of thinking from those who may be very different from us. This gift to others invites them to contribute insights derived from these unique gifts and abilities, even in the context of differences of thought and behavior. As leaders practicing hospitality, we often serve as angels of God without even knowing it. It is an art that more Christians need to cultivate.

Let me share two insights into this fascinating relationship between “spiritual hospitality” and Christian leadership.

I. First, the gift of spiritual hospitality is a love gift *to* Christ. Colossians 3:17, 23-24 reminds us that our service to others is service to the Lord Christ. In our efforts we can be hurt, misunderstood and rejected, or we can be appreciated, affirmed and accepted. The response, however, does not dictate our action. We serve others because He first loved us.

Let me share a very personal illustration. Following my retirement from MVNU, I received a letter from an alumnus. After a warm greeting, he said, “I want you to know I appreciate the profound impact you had on my life while I was at MVNU. As I entered the university as an atheist, you were far and away one of the most interesting people I had the opportunity to hear in chapel...You believed, more fully than I believed anything in my life, every word you said, especially when it came to your love for the students of MVNU. You and your wife were so kind to me. I still remember fondly the

meals my friends and I had with you and your wife in your home and the days you would sit among us in the dining commons for lunch. These are some of my fondest memories.”

The alumnus goes on to talk about his family and his present work as a leader in a technology company. He then asked me a leadership question, “How do I build up the trust of the people with whom I work?”

I remember intensely wanting to create space and make room for the strange and the strangers within the student body. In so doing, I was not only serving students; I was serving Christ. However, the truth is that I do not remember this student.

The mystery of spiritual hospitality is in how often our small tasks are translated by grace into God’s great work. Service to others through making room and creating space is service to Christ. Remember the concluding words from Matthew 25:40, *“The King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”*

Our gifts of hospitality to others are not selective spiritual gifts given by God to only a few for use in the kingdom. Rather, our gifts of care and concern to others are practical expressions on the job and in the home of our love for Christ.

For sure, a commitment to a leadership lifestyle of spiritual hospitality requires some tough answers to the question: How will my bias for spiritual hospitality impact the way I live, learn, work, and lead? This is a huge leadership question. Spiritual hospitality in the real world in which we live and work takes time, patience, and understanding.

Remember, in practicing spiritual hospitality, we serve Christ. Through making room and creating space for the strange and the strangers, the potential is created that they will grow and mature in Christ.

Inasmuch as the gift of spiritual hospitality is a love gift to Christ...

II. The gift of spiritual hospitality is also a love gift *from* Christ.

The miracle of miracles is that we are blessed when we reach out to others. Christ turns our gifts of hospitality to others into gifts from Him to us. We find our Lord in the midst of our service to others. How often we experience God’s abiding presence in the midst

of our very ordinary expressions of making room and creating space for those with whom we live and work!

Compassionate action to students, family members, or co-workers is being to others a living witness of the risen Christ. (See Acts 1:22.) A blessing to others, perhaps. A God-given "yes," for sure, to us! Something happens to us and in us as we reach out to others with gifts of hospitality. What a miracle of God's mercy! His grace flows to us and through us when we work, play, and lead with "*the mind of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 2:16b)!

To embrace this conviction to lead by making room and creating space requires us to ask the question: "What will it mean for me to be a Christian leader as a public-school teacher, businessman or woman, faculty member, spouse or parent?" When misunderstandings are frequent, expectations are intense, and rejection is obvious.

The mature and the immature, the Christian and the non-Christian, the saint and the hypocrite may work or study alongside each other. And we have the responsibility to lead them, teach them, care for them, listen to them, and pray with them! There may also be friends in your lives - at home, on the job, or in your local church - who will question if you really have what it takes to be a leader, the kind of holy leader about which I have spoken in this service.

Are there risks? Yes! Hurts? Yes! Pain? Yes! Disappointment? Yes!

Yet, with this theology of holiness and passion for servant leadership also comes God's blessing, anointing, presence, and wisdom! God has a way of using our availability and our efforts toward others in ways we could never imagine. In the process, He blesses us in ways we never dreamed possible!

In leading with a bias toward people, not power, you and I increasingly communicate to others that we care deeply for them as we:

Honor their time.

Value their work.

Build their confidence.

Increase their competence.

Support their decisions.

Hear their words.

Network their ideas.

Affirm their dreams.

Simplify their assignments.

Strengthen their faith.

The evidence of leadership is seen in the lives of the followers.

In so leading, we are changed! Increasingly, we become the change, by God's grace, we desire to see in others. Others around us may or may not be impacted by what happens within us. But what happens to us is transformative!

We grow. We change. We mature. And, in the process, we experience the peace of God which transcends understanding. In the process, we are freed from insisting on change within others.

Again, the gift of hospitality - this gift of creating space and making room for others, by grace alone, becomes a love gift from Christ to us. We grow and mature in our faith as we increasingly practice hospitality.

Remember, the miracle of miracles is that we are blessed when we reach out to others in Jesus' name.

In conclusion, let me remind you that fundamentally, the relationship between spiritual hospitality and Christian leadership is much more than being nice, feeding friends, or enduring hard to get along with co-workers, colleagues, family members, or friends.

It is a way of life for leaders who are passionately Christian and dictates how we approach those with whom we live, work, and serve. For the strange and the strangers, the disenfranchised and lonely, our family members and friends, creating space and making room for them is the essence of hospitality, biblically understood.

We experience the surprises of God in our lives in the process of enabling others to grow and mature. Through providing space and making room for others to change, we

are given *space* by God to grow and mature in Christlikeness.

Spiritual hospitality is nothing less than God's amazing grace working in and through us as Christian leaders! I challenge you to pursue this nearly forgotten practice in the Christian tradition.

Join me in seeking to discover the rich implications of spiritual hospitality, especially as it relates to those with whom we work (or will work). By God's grace, determine to create space and make room on Monday for the strange and the strangers with whom you work. In so doing you will increasingly practice spiritual hospitality and live out the MVNU motto, "To seek to learn is to seek to serve."

Questions for personal and/or group reflection:

1. Think of someone who has shown expressions of hospitality to you. How has that hospitality impacted you? How has it motivated and shaped your own expressions of hospitality to others?
2. Think of those to whom you have shown hospitality. Why did you make the effort to do so? How could your expressions of hospitality be enhanced by the remembrance that such expressions of hospitality are *to* Christ?
3. Think of when you have shown hospitality to others. In making space for them, how were you enhanced by the experience? How could your expressions of hospitality be enhanced by the remembrance that such expressions of hospitality are *from* Christ? To whom would Christ have you show greater hospitality?