

CALLED TO PARTNERSHIP WITH THE POOR

Introduction

Sondra Higgins Matthaei

For the Wesleys, the foundation of a life of holiness was trust in the God who loves the whole of creation, and their guiding principle for the practice of faith was "love to God and love to neighbor." In his sermon, "Marks of the New Birth," John Wesley described the fruit of God's love:

The necessary fruit of this love of God is the love of our neighbour; of every soul which God hath made; not excepting our enemies; not excepting those who are now "despitefully using and persecuting us;" -- a love whereby we love every [human] as ourselves; as we love our own souls. Nay, our Lord has expressed it still more strongly, teaching us to "love one another even as [God] hath loved us."¹

Social holiness or love to neighbor is a response to God's love for us and in us. In this paper I suggest that the church is called to respond to the poor through hospitality and partnership.

As I talk, I will be referring to ReStart, a ministry with homeless people in Kansas City, Missouri. Your brochure outlines some of the basic information about this ministry. ReStart was begun about 15 years ago when a "dying" downtown church decided to open the church for homeless persons. This privately-funded ministry has now moved to a large building in the heart of the city that houses a variety of ministries.

Hospitality and Partnership

A biblical image of hospitality is available to us through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In Luke 14:16-23, Jesus tells the story of the host who prepares a feast and issues invitations, but those on the first guest list had important agendas and were not able to attend. The second guest list invites those who were normally forbidden access to such meals in their society: "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" and the foreign travelers from the "roads and lanes".

It does not take a great leap of imagination to think of God as the host in this parable and the banquet as a metaphor for God's rule. Under God's rule, all who seek a relationship with God share God's life-giving food. Karris writes, "Jesus reveals a God who 'eats with,' shares life with society's handicapped and declares a person righteous who does the same."² God's gospel feast brought together the unexpected, the "poor in spirit," the stranger. In the words of Parker Palmer:

We gain a deeper understanding of our relation to the stranger when we remember that Jesus did not merely point to, but identified himself with the sick, the prisoner, the stranger: "Truly . . . as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it unto me." If we take that statement seriously, we see how central is the stranger to the Christian conception of life. The stranger is not simply one who needs us. We need the stranger. We need the stranger if we are to know Christ and serve God, in truth and in love. For it is only by knowing the truth and by serving in love that we ourselves will be set free.³

We have been notified in advance of God's invitation. Craddock describes what we are to do: "Hospitality, then, is not having each other over on Friday evenings, but welcoming those who are in no position to host us in return."⁴ And for Palmer, hospitality also "means letting the stranger remain a stranger while offering acceptance nonetheless."⁵ God's invitation to eat together is a sign of God's saving grace through the blessing of relationship, and we are to offer that same grace to others.

Partnership means collaboration, a sharing of power. The word *koinonia* is translated as "partnership" in the New Jerusalem Bible. Koenig writes, "In a great majority of passages where the *koinonia* words appear, the meaning has to do with human participation in a blessing or task or higher reality that is directed by God."⁶ To be in partnership means to work together toward achieving God's goal of mercy, love, and justice for the poor. For the Whiteheads, this partnership requires mutuality: "The giving and receiving go both ways. In a mutual relationship, each party brings something of value; each receives something of worth. Partnership thrives when we recognize and respect this mutual exchange of gifts."⁷

The church must begin its move toward partnership by accepting what Henri Nouwen calls the "paradox of hospitality:"

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create an emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own

dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his [or her] own.⁹

Establishing Partnership

The church is called to live out love to God and love to neighbor by establishing partnership with the poor. Partnership means recognizing the worth and dignity of each human being, thus valuing God's creation and proclaiming that lives do matter. We may begin by changing our language. For example, reStart uses a language of hospitality and calls its residents, "guests," "rent" for space in the transitional living area is called "shared maintenance." Hospitality is the basis for all of the language at reStart and everyone is encouraged to speak a language of hospitality and to "pass the hospitality on" by welcoming the stranger in their midst.

Partnership means knowing each other well and listening to each other with care. ReStart begins to establish partnership by listening to stories and accepting people where they are. Guests set their own goals and ReStart staff help them capitalize on their strengths.

Partnership means collaborating and sharing power. Some of the guests at ReStart serve on the Board of Directors and their wisdom about needed ministries has shaped decisions to create an intervention ministry for runaways. Guests also recommended the

acceptance of HIV positive persons into the transitional living center.

In Palmer's words, partnership requires a hospitable place "where strangers can meet," including the stranger within ourselves.⁹ "A hospitable space is alive with trust and good will, rooted in a sense of our common humanity."¹⁰ A place where strangers meet must be a "safe" place, place where feelings, including anger, are acceptable, where there is room to explore ideas and feelings and fears, where there are clear ground rules, where there is private space for retreat and reflection.

At ReStart, strangers meet only in public places. After the guests are served by volunteers from churches or other community organizations, the servers sit down to eat with the guests. Strangers also meet when work and study groups stay in the ReStart retreat center. These middle-class guests share in work responsibilities and have time to reflect on their own attitudes about the poor.

Partnership requires education. A dream at ReStart for an educational program is beginning to take shape, first through the retreat center for middle-class guests. But the dream also includes educating local churches about ways they can be involved in preventing homelessness, of learning what can be done when families are in trouble from missed house payments, how churches

can help in job retraining, how they can organize for community action on behalf of the poor.

The church is called to partnership with the poor by recognizing the worth and dignity of each human being, by sharing power in decision-making, by providing a hospitable place where strangers can meet, and by preparation for partnership through education.

I suspect that we, the church, have the most to gain through our partnership with the poor. When I asked for a description of the community life at ReStart, I heard a vision of what it must be like to live under God's rule:

- They don't think twice about sharing what little they have. They would give their last nickel to help someone else.
- They help each other in the hopes that they can make it out. They do not do it for their own gain.
- They listen to each other.
- They are not competitive, but share helpful information with each other rather than holding it for themselves.
- They look out for each other, noticing who is not there.
- They do not worry about tomorrow.¹¹

While this all too human community struggles with living out its vision, those who live and work at ReStart have learned that we are all in this world together. We can no longer afford to be "us" and "them." We need to come together with the knowledge that we can learn from each other through love to God and love to neighbor.

In the words of John Wesley:

To you I need add but one word more. Remember (what was spoken at first) the solemn declaration of [the One], whose you are and whom you serve, coming in the clouds of heaven! While you are promoting this comprehensive charity, which contains feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, lodging the stranger; indeed all good works in one; let those animating words be written on your hearts, and sounding in your ears: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me."¹²

It may be that "the least of these" have a witness and a challenge for us. Partnership with the poor may be a means of grace that brings new life to the body of Christ.

Endnotes

1. John Wesley, "Marks of the New Birth," The Works of John Wesley, 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 426.
2. Robert J. Karris, Luke: Artist and Theologian (New York: Paulist, 1985), 61.
3. Parker Palmer, The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
4. Fred Craddock, Interpretation: Luke (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 179.
5. Palmer, 68.
6. John Koenig, New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 9.
7. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, The Promise of Partnership: Leadership and Ministry in an Adult Church (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 8.
8. Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 51.
9. Palmer, 71.
10. Palmer, 67-68.
11. My thanks to Bonnie Rosen Cowherd, Director of Spiritual Life, for her help in understanding something of the theology and reality of life at ReStart.

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12. John Wesley, "The Reward of the Righteous," The Works of John Wesley, 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 413-414.