

Rhythms Week 3

Cultivating the Virtue of Love by Engaging the Practice of Hospitality

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal**** is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. *This week, we will seek to grow in the virtue of Love by engaging the practice of Hospitality.*

While we use the word **love** to express so many different good emotions, our overuse of the word has diminished the meaning of the word. Love is more than a preference, feeling or affection. It is a virtue that reflects God's own character and purpose for creating the world. The Scriptures teach us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and further describe that love in terms of God's relational faithfulness (*Hebrew: hesed*) and selfless, unconditional care and delight (*Greek: agape*). Jesus says that the core of discipleship is not gaining theological knowledge or insight, but loving God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). This is reflected in the Passover feast during which Jesus commands his followers to love one another as he has loved them (John 13:34).

And what does this love look like? By word and example, Jesus shows us that true love involves self-sacrifice for the good of others. He tells us that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13) and demonstrates this in his death on the cross for our sake. Because God has loved (and loves) us this way in Christ, we are *both freed and called to love others*: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Rowan Williams describes love in these terms: "*Love: an expression of the freedom to receive. Love: that which drives us to take time and to let go of anxiety. Love: that which permits us to be enriched and to be 'given to', made alive, to be breathed into. Not a passive thing, as some of those images might suggest, but a state of openness to joy. Love: not simply as doing good but as a deep contemplative regard for the world, for humanity in general and for human beings in particular, and for God.*"

Hospitality is a practice that cultivates love because it involves opening our lives to others in a manner that integrates respect and care. Likewise, in order to open our lives to others, we must die to ourselves. These are strong statements, especially since we often associate "hospitality" with entertaining friends at a dinner party or enjoying amenities at a hotel. While hospitality includes this, the spiritual practice of hospitality invites us to go further and deeper. Hospitality, as a Christian practice, is about sharing life with others in real and concrete ways, not only with our friends and those who fit easily into our lives, but also with strangers and those who only fit into our lives if we make room for them. Hospitality is about seeing and receiving others, affirming their dignity, and welcoming them into relationship and community, even when that requires sacrifice on our part.

Hospitality is woven throughout scriptures and has been a priority for the Church. It is spiritual practice we must recapture and cultivate. As Christine Pohl writes: *“For most of the history of the church, hospitality was understood to encompass physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships. It meant response to the physical needs of strangers for food, shelter, and protection, but also a recognition of their worth and common humanity.... Hospitality, because it was such a fundamental human practice, always included family, friends, and influential contacts. The distinctive Christian contribution was the emphasis on including the poor and neediest, the ones who could not return the favor.”* Similarly, Henri Nouwen declares: *“If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.”*

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on from Week 2? That is okay! Continue practicing the rhythm of Week 2 until you feel ready to move forward.

If you are ready for Week 3, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time, not all at once.

1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group:

- When you hear "hospitality" what comes to mind? How does it compare to the definition above?
- How have you experienced deep hospitality in your own life?
- Why do you think hospitality is a practice that cultivates love?
- What are some challenges or limits that make hospitality difficult?
- How does the spiritual practice of hospitality differ/compliment our normal patterns of socializing?

2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE: Recognize the power of a core (double-edged) lie we often believe: *“I belong to no one, and my neighbor does not belong to me.”*

One of the biggest obstacles to our practice of hospitality has to do with our own sense of belonging. When we lose sight of the fact that we belong to God and to one another, we begin to function as autonomous beings in the world. From there, we see ourselves as individuals on our own to make a life for ourselves according to our own desires, ambitions, and abilities. In other words, we begin to live in self-serving (directing, protecting, promoting, soothing) ways that are primarily oriented toward our own interests, and the needs of others then begin to look like “not my problem” (to the extent that we even notice them at all).

When I believe that you don’t belong to me (or I to you) in any meaningful sense, then I begin to relate to you either: (1) transactionally if I think you can benefit me; (2)

adversarially if I think you are threatening me somehow; or (2) dismissively if I perceive you as not worth my time and attention. Of course, this way of using, combatting, or rejecting others is the opposite of love and the great obstacle to hospitality, which is all about receiving one another as a gift and sharing our lives non-transactionally and self-sacrificially.

Reflect on these lies by reading the following anti-Psalm:

Anti-Psalm 133

How unpleasant it is to have to make adjustments
to accommodate others so we can share the same space.
It's not like we are family or anything;
we don't belong to one another.
I'm not your keeper, and you aren't mine.
I belong to no one but myself
and to those with whom I freely choose to associate,
but that's my choice,
and I retain the right to change my mind and opt out at any time.
If unity doesn't come easily, it's not worth the work.
Sharing life is just too difficult to be worth it.
Opening myself to you means opening myself to pain (or at least inconvenience).
Opening my home to you means fewer leftovers to eat and more dishes to clean.
There's nothing really to be gained from yielding to someone else,
sacrificing my own preferences, sharing what I have,
or considering another point of view.
There's definitely nothing refreshing or rejuvenating
about staying together and working through differences.
Unfriend, unfollow, and move on.
I choose the "cancel culture" way of maintaining a uniformity that costs me little
instead of practicing costly hospitality in the pursuit of unity.
Discomfort and disagreement are intolerable; divorce is better.
Our human relationships have nothing to do with our relationship with God.
I don't need the community of God's people to experience God's blessing.
In fact, these people are more a hindrance than a help in my pursuit of the good life.
Life is too short to waste time and energy on them. They're dead to me.

Notice the core lie at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the double-edged lie: "I belong to no one, and my neighbor does not belong to me?" If that doesn't feel like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH. You belong to God and to God's family: both the creation family (humanity) of all God's image-bearers in the world and the covenant

family (the church) of those who, by faith and baptism in Christ, are set apart by God to share God's love and blessing with the world. You are God's beloved, and so is your neighbor. We belong to God and one another, and God gives us to one another as gifts to be received, honored, and cherished. In receiving and serving one another, we receive and serve God, and we participate with God in recognizing, welcoming, and blessing God's beloved.

Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief? How does your heart open to others?

4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION. See how Jesus explains the connection between hospitality and love in Matthew 25:34-40 and exemplifies both in Luke 15:1-7:

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them,

‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

5. Questions for Prayerful Examination

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of love and the practice of hospitality have to do with your becoming that person?
- How do you think practicing hospitality might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?
- What are some barriers or challenges that hinder this community’s practice of hospitality? What is one, concrete thing we can do to overcome one of these in order to become more hospitable?
- What do you notice about Jesus in the passages above? What’s one way that you can imitate Jesus’s practice of hospitality in your own life this week?
- Hospitality is one practice that is uniquely hindered (or at least reshaped) by the COVID-19 pandemic. What are some ways we can reimagine hospitality and creatively practice it even now? How have you experienced creative hospitality during the pandemic?
- Think about how practicing hospitality might reshape the way you engage political discussions. How can you become more hospitable toward others who disagree with you? How can you become more hospitable toward those who may need your advocacy?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you (or we) need God’s help right now?
- How might you encourage your City Group towards hospitality? How can you welcome each other more deeply when meeting over Zoom? How have you experienced hospitality in your group? Make a note and share with your group as feels appropriate.

6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.

Arrow Prayers. We’ll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose “Jesus Storybook Bible” many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn’t have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some “arrow prayers” for this week’s practice:

- Jesus, as you have loved me, help me to love others.
- God, your grace is enough for me; your grace is enough for my neighbor.
- Jesus, I see you in the face of my neighbor.
- God, I welcome you into this moment.

Habit Stacking. Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear in Atomic Habits. Some ideas:

- As you do household chores, or as you commute to work, listen to a podcast or audiobook that features a perspective different from your own—politically, racially, culturally, etc. Make room in your head and heart for the stories, experiences, and viewpoints of others. You may disagree with what you hear, but still make room. Ask the Holy Spirit to cultivate understanding, and patience, as well as to provide opportunities to have gracious conversations with those who are different.
- Welcome others into the things you are already doing. If you are running errands, see if your neighbor needs anything. If you are walking or driving to work, call a friend you've been meaning to catch up with. If you are taking a lunch break at work, ask a coworker to join you, especially one who is difficult for you and may be surprised by your invitation.
- Print the Rune of Hospitality from the Week 3 page on our website. Post it by your sink, mirror, or desk at work. Practice seeing "Christ in the stranger's guise" throughout your day

Practices of Love and Hospitality for Community & Mission

- Listening well is one of the simplest and profoundest acts of hospitality. Listening well requires us to give our full attention to the speaker. Listening well is an act of receiving the presence and words of the speaker without interjecting our own personal agendas, no matter how well intentioned. In other words, listening well requires us to die to ourselves. Next time you're on a call, Zoom session, or socially-distant walk, practice hospitable listening.
- "Love your neighbor with your eyes." Practice seeing every neighbor - including every stranger - as someone who belongs to you.
- See Jesus in the face of your neighbor. In the spirit of Matthew 25:40 (Jesus: "as you did to one of the least of these... you did to me"), practice seeing and receiving others as a way of seeing and receiving Jesus.
- Practicing hospitality involves both giving and receiving. Practice receiving hospitality by asking someone for help, advice, or prayer this week.
- Is there someone you often see but have never properly met (in your neighborhood or at work, perhaps)? Next time you see them, say hello and introduce yourself.
- Can you notice and meet someone's need today in a creative way?

Sources Cited

- Williams, Rowan. *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 33.
- Pohl, Christine. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 6.
- Nouwen, Henri. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books, 1975), 66.

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