Reflection on Hospitality

by Joan Hershbell

When I think about the practice of hospitality I am reminded of two examples that have formed me. During the Second World War and for several years after, my mother and I lived in hotels, motels and rooming houses. I always felt that I did not really belong anyplace until we would return East to my grandparents’ tiny apartment. Despite the crowded living arrangements they opened their arms and hearts whenever we returned to them. My tiny chair and table with a little yellow teapot on it would be waiting for me. My grandparents shared their space, time, stories and love which made me feel special.

Years later, as a newlywed, I was often invited into the home of a neighbor who shared recipes (and her Gourmet magazines!) and who served as a role model as a loving parent and step parent. We shared many meals over nearly 50 years. Three years ago when she was in frail health and connected to oxygen she insisted upon preparing a meal for me to cook for us the next day when we visited. Sharing that meal was especially memorable because she died just six weeks later. What an example of radical hospitality. The memory of her generous, loving hospitality lives on.

So it is that I want to try replicate the feelings in others that I have experienced. To acknowledge how special each person is by sitting at a meal together, sharing stories and taking the time to build a connection. It is to see the Christ in another by generously opening one’s arms, home and heart. It is to be aware of being surrounded by God’s love.

It is, of course, always easier to be open and loving and hospitable to the people we know. There is more risk to be open and giving to the stranger. It can be more difficult to see Christ in those who live or act differently from us. Yet, the real gift is the discovery of whom the stranger may really be. Once, years ago my four year old daughter and I were walking in the neighborhood at dusk when an Ethiopian man approached us looking for a place to eat. At the time there were no restaurants open on Sunday evening so, naturally, we invited him home for supper. It turned out that he was a theology student at Luther Seminary and by accepting our hospitality his gift to us was greater than that which we had given him.