

BELONGING**LEVITICUS 19:34***by Elaine Poproski*

Last Sunday, and then again in our small groups, we talked a lot about listening. We talked about listening – really listening well – being part of what it means to love people. We looked at the 1 Corinthians 13 passage in which we find all sorts of descriptor of love and we connected those descriptors to listening. One of the ways we love people, which we're commanded by Jesus to do, is to listen well.

We talked about some characteristics of good listening. For instance:

- Good listeners are deliberate about eliminating, or at least limiting distractions. This includes focusing on what the other person is saying rather than on what we want to say next. Sometimes when we're in a conversation and we're thinking about what we want to say next, we lose track of what the other person is saying.
- Good listeners are interested in understanding. This leads us to pay attention to non-verbal cues like body language. When we're listening to understand, we ask questions. We ask questions to clarify meaning and to ensure we're truly hearing what's being said, but we also ask questions simply because we're curious and we want to understand – to know – the other person.
- Good listeners aren't afraid to disagree, but they do so in a way that doesn't demean the other person or invalidate their feelings and experiences.

I wonder if anyone would be willing to share from an experience this past week, an experience of someone who listened well to you.

Space for people to share.

One of the things we also talked about last week was importance of asking good questions. We talked about good questions being those that don't just lead to a yes or no answer; they're questions that allow for various levels or depths of an answer, ensuring the answerer has the freedom to choose how deep they're willing to go with you; good questions come from a place of genuine humility – of genuinely wanting to understand the other person more than we need to be understood ourselves.

I wonder if anyone came across or thought up a good question this week that you'd be willing to share?

Space for people to share.

Henri Nouwen is a renowned scholar, author, priest... and he wrote this: "Listening is an art that must be developed, not a technique that can be applied as a monkey wrench to nuts and bolts. It needs the full and real presence of people to each other. It is indeed one of the highest forms of hospitality."¹

I'm going to read that again: "Listening is an art that must be developed, not a technique that can be applied as a monkey wrench to nuts and bolts. It needs the full and real presence of people to each other." Let's pause here for a moment. We've been talking about listening in the context of a one-on-one conversation. But what if we extended that so we think about listening in a group context? What does it mean to be really present, so that I'm listening to what's happening around me – to my actual neighbourhood, not just my neighbours?

Nouwen goes on: "It [listening] is indeed one of the highest forms of hospitality." Which leads to what I'm focusing on this week, which is hospitality. I wanted to start with where we were last week because it all intertwines. It's not so much that it builds, but it's all part of the same thing, which is really, ultimately, just about how we love well.

Hospitality is about belonging. If you are reading the bookⁱⁱ along with us, chapter 3 includes some great research about how people aren't interested in just coming into a welcoming environment, but they're looking for places to belong.

What do you think of when you hear the word *hospitality*? Immediately what comes to mind for me is this: If I go to someone's house to visit them, they are being hospitable – they are opening up their home. It usually also requires that their home is clean and tidy. Or if I am going to extend hospitality, I expect of myself that my house is clean and tidy and that there's food prepared. There are all these assumptions about what hospitality is.

Space for people to make suggestions.

I was thinking also about the fact that we have an entire hospitality industry. We've turned hospitality into a commercial industry – a global money-maker – hotels, restaurants, and the like, in which it is professionals doing the work of hospitality.

Hospitality is about creating a safe space – we talked about that a little bit in our small groups last week. A safe space is a space that is free of judgment, it's a space where, in Nouwen's words again, "strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings."ⁱⁱⁱ In the same book, he talks about going from being a stranger to being a friend – that that's what hospitality invites.^{iv} It's a space in which there's room for listening and for good questions. It's a space in which the other is a valued guest, not just an obligation or responsibility. Hospitality is about community. It's about belonging.

In Leviticus 19:34... I don't often include Leviticus when I'm preaching, but in this instance it fits. Leviticus is one of those books in the Old Testament that is packed full of commandments from God. And this verse in Leviticus 19 is one of those commandments. It's a commandment that shaped Israel and that should continue to shape us. It reads this way: The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

The alien is the foreigner – the person not originally part of Israel. But it's bigger than that. The alien is the stranger – the person we don't know – the person we aren't connected to.

In the ancient world, this principle of hospitality was essential for people's safety and well-being. There wasn't a whole hospitality industry; people couldn't simply pay for accommodation and

food; they were completely dependent on others. As an aside, I think it's interesting that we have created an entire, global industry to ensure we don't have to depend on others – to ensure our own independence (at least, if we can afford it). This elevation of independence as one of our highest values is so contrary to the values of community and belonging that flow through Scripture. Even when we are welcomed into someone's home, think about what politeness dictates. We don't go empty-handed – we contribute something. It's like we're paying our way, so we're not just receiving. Think about the obligation we feel (it might be at the forefront of our thinking, or it may be just in the background) that if someone invites us into their home, we have to invite them into ours. It's like we have to pay it back; we can't just receive because that turns us into dependents.

In the ancient world, hospitality was expected because it was necessary. But there were limits to what was required. And one of those limits was that you weren't required to be hospitable to strangers and foreigners. When God commanded Israel as he did in Leviticus 19:34, he was commanding them to be different – to be more inclusive – more welcoming – to be the embodiment of his kingdom. Hear the command again:

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

You have to be hospitable, God is saying. You have show hospitality, not just to your family and friends, or not just to your visiting relative who came from afar, but to everybody – the person on the street who you don't know, the refugee, the immigrant... Hospitality as God commands dictates that we must treat them all as if they are our family – our friends.

Think about the story of the Good Samaritan.^v It's the story of the man who was attacked by robbers who left him for dead in a ditch by the side of the road. Eventually, after having been ignored by a couple passers-by, a Samaritan stopped to help. Jesus told the story in response to the question: Who is my neighbour? It was a question asked most likely because it was already agreed that the greatest commandments were to love God and to love our neighbour, but the person asking the question wanted to know where the limits were. They wanted to know exactly who they were expected to love – to be kind, generous, hospitable to – and who they weren't. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to point out that there are no limits to who we are expected to love. Even the people of whom the surrounding culture says we don't have to love, Jesus says we do – there are no limits – everyone is inside this commandment.

This whole idea that we are required to love – to be hospitable toward – everyone, especially the alien or stranger among us, comes up over and over and over again throughout the Bible. When Israel is in trouble with God, it's often connected to their failure to love the stranger. In Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, God warns the people of impending judgment against them for all sorts of things including “those who thrust aside the alien.”^{vi} In the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, in chapter 13, verse 2 we read: Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. That's a reference to what would be a familiar story to Hebrews' readers. It comes from Genesis 18. This is the story, beginning in verse 2:

² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

Listen to that from a hospitality perspective: He sees these strangers approaching; he doesn't hide, hoping they'll think he's not home; He runs out to greet them. He greets them in a way that says, “I am here as your servant. Please don't keep going. Please allow me to serve you – allow me to bring you some water, to rest your feet for a moment.

⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Notice that he had just invited them to stay for some water and bread. But instead, what he did when they agreed to stay, was prepare them a banquet. He went over and above the basic needs.

As the story goes, we discover that these men were actually angels sent by God. But there's nothing in the story as it's told to suggest that Abraham had any inkling of who they were at that point. One of the things they do is promise Abraham and Sarah that despite their old age, God's promise of a child is going to be fulfilled.

When these men leave Abraham, they go on to his nephew's city. Abraham's nephew, Lot, lived in the notorious city of Sodom. When they arrived, Lot rushed out to meet them to invite them to stay with his family in their home. In response, everyone else in Sodom surrounded Lot's home and threatened the strangers. They called for Lot to send them out, and when he refused, they tried to break down the door. Now, the city of Sodom is an extreme example of a lack of hospitality, and in fact, anyone else in the ancient world would have frowned on that complete lack of hospitality. It's a story that illustrates the evilness of that city.

It's interesting that when we focus on that story in our day and age, we don't focus on hospitality as being the great evil. Why? I think it's because we don't really value hospitality. It's nice, if you can do it, but it's not a big deal. Sodom's end result was extermination. This is the story that leads up to that. The townspeople were threatening the visitors, trying to break down Lot's door to get at them.

God's command to Israel, and to us, that we are to welcome the alien – the foreigner, the stranger – goes way above and beyond what was generally expected in the day and age.

In Matthew 25, beginning at verse 31, Jesus said this:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will

put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.’ ³⁷ 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? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”

This is hospitality: to treat every person we meet as if they were Jesus himself.

What would that be like? If in every person we saw, we saw Jesus. How would our behaviour change? How would we speak differently?

Imagine that when others saw you, they saw Jesus. What would it feel like to be treated as if you were Jesus?

What would our church be like if everyone saw each other, regardless of whether or not the other is a Christian or a stranger or someone we’ve known forever... What would our church be like if we all saw each other as Jesus?

Imagine if you looked at someone and saw Jesus. How much would you listen? What great questions would you ask? How deeply would you want to know them because you see Jesus there?

Here’s the thing, if people are going to experience being loved by God, it will be because they’ve experienced being loved by us. It will be because they’ve experienced being heard by us. It will be because they’ve experienced being welcomed by us – but not just welcomed as we often think of it – as simply being nice to people – but welcomed in a way that communicates that we want to know them and be known by them. It’s about belonging, not just welcoming. It’s about providing a space and people who are more interested in knowing and understanding the other than they are in judging and dictating rules and expectations. It’s about making room for all types of people with all sorts of ideas and interests and even values.

Henri Nouwen identifies that hospitality is about creating space for the stranger to become a friend.^{vii} It’s not about the stranger becoming a dependent. It’s about friendship – true community. It’s about belonging. And in that space of belonging, both parties are free to share their gifts, their stories, their experiences, because they are interdependent.

This is how we love as Jesus loved. This is how we love as Jesus commanded. By being welcoming, by creating spaces of belonging, not just being nice to each other

ⁱ Henri Nouwen. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 1975), chapter 5, Kobo.

ⁱⁱ Craig Springer. *How to Revive Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

ⁱⁱⁱ Nouwen, chapter 4.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Luke 10:25-37

^{vi} Malachi 3:5.

^{vii} Nouwen, Chapter 4.