

Emma J. Justes



*Hearing
Beyond
the
Words*

*How to Become
a Listening Pastor*

**HEARING BEYOND THE WORDS:
HOW TO BECOME A LISTENING PASTOR**

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LISTENING AS CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY

Introduction

The Scriptures use many different forms of the words listen, listened, hear, and heard. I located almost fifteen hundred references. The phrase often repeated to the people of Israel, “Hear, O Israel . . .” alerted the people to listen, to attend to the important words that would follow. The prophetic tradition that declared, “Thus says the Lord,” emphasized the act of listening as the people were called to attention with these introductory words. In the ministry of Jesus, his parables frequently ended with the phrase, “Let whoever has ears to hear listen.” How can we, then, ignore the importance of listening?

Whereas we have a strong scriptural tradition that emphasizes listening and hearing, I turn to the biblical image of hospitality for a theological grounding of the practice of listening, because hospitality bespeaks the kind of relationship best suited for listening and hearing. As I have worked with listening I have seen that there are some clear commonalities between hospitality and listening. Both deserve more importance in ministry. Therefore, in this chapter we will examine selected passages of scripture that deal with hospitality in order to explore how it can enrich our understanding and practice of listening.

The qualities required in hospitality—its essence—I propose are also those elements that are necessary for effective listening. An examination

of hospitality gives us a deeper, more nuanced understanding of listening. My purpose in exploring the relationship between hospitality and listening, at its heart, is to enable, encourage, and support the practice of more effective listening.

This chapter explores the meaning and practice of hospitality in a Christian context, identifying its implications for listening to one another. My hope is that seeing the connections and gaining greater understanding of hospitality will enhance the practice of listening on the part of those in ministry.

So what can we learn from an understanding of hospitality that will help us move toward better listening? Throughout this chapter I invite you to keep listening in mind as we discover more about hospitality. What we discover here about hospitality will lead to the practice of more effective listening.

A Scriptural Base for Hospitality

It took many years of reading the Bible before I began to become aware of the importance of hospitality in its message. Now I find it difficult to miss the significance of hospitality as I read the Scriptures. A familiar and foundational story of hospitality from the Scripture is found in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis. The story begins when three strangers arrive at the tent of Abraham and Sarah in the desert.

Dr. Dennis Groh describes the appropriate approach to a tent in the desert. Recognizing that the desert is itself less than hospitable, hospitality among those who travel the desert becomes extremely important. The one who approaches another's tent is required to sit at a distance from the tent and wait to be noticed. To approach unacknowledged can be seen as a threatening gesture. Once acknowledged, the host goes out to welcome the strangers who are then free to approach the tent.¹ Readers of Genesis 18 would benefit from holding this context in mind. Hospitality is culturally sensitive, which makes it important to be aware of the context in which hospitality is being experienced or observed.

In Genesis 18 Abraham noticed three men standing in the desert.² Abraham ran to greet them (v. 2). He welcomed the men to his tent and offered them water to wash with. Abraham was insistent in encouraging them to accept his hospitality and sensitive in acknowledging that they were on a journey and he did not intend to detain them once they were

refreshed (vv. 4-5). Sarah and their servants were enlisted to join in the quick preparation of a feast for these guests. The best flour and a plump calf were chosen to serve these strangers in the desert (vv. 6-8).

The guests, true to hospitality's form, offered their hosts something before leaving. They left the childless couple, well into old age, the promise that not only would the visitors return, but that Abraham and Sarah were still going to be parents (vv. 10-11). One of the men said that by the next year Sarah would be the mother of a son, which would fulfill the promise God had made to Abraham many years earlier. The visitors were offered excellent hospitality and they responded with a "hostess gift" of inestimable worth. This story of Abraham and Sarah is illustrative of a pervasive biblical attitude toward hospitality that we see again and again. Hospitality is required and hospitality is rewarded.

The story continued when the visitors left and Abraham walked a distance with them (v. 16). The Lord, who was entertained by Abraham and Sarah on this occasion, was on the way to Sodom in order to see firsthand whether the "outcry against Sodom" warranted its destruction for its wickedness (vv. 20-21). This visitor hung back, talking with Abraham, as Abraham negotiated with him to save the city from destruction. Abraham challenged the Lord's sense of justice in destroying any people in the city who were righteous along with those who were wicked (vv. 23-25). The Lord graciously agreed to each of the lowered stakes offered until Abraham got the Lord to agree that for the sake of ten righteous people Sodom would not be destroyed (vv. 24-32). I often wonder what the Lord would have done if Abraham's asking got down to one person.

When the strangers arrived in Sodom (there were then only two), Lot insisted that they accept his hospitality for the night, even though they resisted. Although he only offered water to wash their feet and a night's lodging, he provided for them a fine feast (19:2-4). After Lot and his guests had eaten, the men of the city, acting in stark contrast to Lot's hospitality, demanded that Lot send the strangers out in order that they "may know them"(v. 5). Lot took his role as host so seriously that he offered to protect his guests by handing over his own virgin daughters to the mob (v. 8).³ The purposes of the mob were thwarted with the help of the strangers, who set out a plan for rescuing Lot and his family from the sure destruction that would befall Sodom (vv. 9-17).

In becoming a host to the strangers, Lot had put himself in the role of protecting his guests. This is a further obligation of hospitality. Here the story of Lot's hospitality differs from the story of Abraham and Sarah. In

Lot's story it became necessary for Lot, as host, to protect his guests, a problem Abraham and Sarah did not face.

The guests, in turn, as they did with Abraham and Sarah, had something of significance to offer Lot and his household. Lot acted to protect his guests, and the guests turned out to be instrumental in the salvation of his family in their rescue.

The roles tend to turn around guest-to-host and host-to-guest when we examine hospitality. The visitor/guest comes with something significant to offer, not with empty hands. The guest comes with a need (for food, shelter, rest), but is not without a blessing to give. The host may anticipate that something will be received from the visitor, but there is no way to know what to expect. The host knows for sure that the household *will be affected by guests* who enter—something, or much, will change.

Central to this second story of hospitality is the bold contrast between the practice of hospitality and the absence of hospitality. Lot was the one who held to and practiced the value of hospitality. The people of Sodom, in their blatant hostility toward strangers, were destroyed for their lack of hospitality—indeed, their *hostility* toward *hospitality*. Every man of the city, “both young and old, all the people to the last man,” participated in the mob that demanded that the strangers be handed over to them; so Abraham's bargain with the Lord to save Sodom for the sake of ten who were righteous was off. Sodom would not be spared. However, the rescue of Lot and his family members who consented to go with him seems to affirm the upholding of God's justice. Where there was true hospitality, in Lot's household, the people were spared.

From the beginning of the story of the people of Israel, hospitality is a core value. Their experiences of being strangers in foreign lands, being slaves in Egypt, and wandering in the desert gave the people a clear sense of the value of hospitality. Being hospitable became a sign of being faithful. The tradition of referring to those who are faithful to God as sons and daughters of Abraham points back to the centrality of this story to the people of Israel.

New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament we find vivid messages about hospitality. I have selected a few to examine here; primarily my focus will be on the story of the “sinful” woman in Luke, chapter seven. This story

began when Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee to eat. We see similar qualities of hospitality in this very different story.

The Outrageous Host

When we read descriptions of biblical events we tend to picture them through our modern-day experience. We would see Jesus coming to the house of the Pharisee, Simon, joining others who were invited, and taking a chair at a table. We must allow ourselves to see where there are differences that do not match our assumptions if we are to come closer to understanding the meaning of the passage. William Herzog offers this description:

Kenneth Bailey has argued that the meal held in Simon's house was a public occasion. Although not everyone was invited to recline at table with the supposedly honored guest, everyone was invited to sit around the wall of the *triclinium* (dining room) and listen to the Pharisees discuss Torah with their visitor.⁴

The scene, thus interpreted, relies on seeing the function of the home of the Pharisee as a place where the synagogue could be extended, where the people could gather to listen to the study and discussion of Torah between invited guests and the Pharisees.⁵ With this understanding, we might see Jesus' easy question to Simon as kicking off the discussion and teaching.

What a different picture we get when we add all the villagers who sit around the wall observing the events and listening to what is said. The scene changes when we take away the chairs to envision invited guests reclining at the table. We have to struggle to picture the scene as it was, with Jesus lying facing the table with his feet stretched out toward the wall of the room.⁶ This arrangement accounts for the scriptural description of the woman's location in relation to Jesus, "She stood *behind him* at his feet" (v. 38). Picturing the event from our context, with Jesus seated at the table in a chair, makes this a puzzling image, and the woman a bit of a contortionist.

Because Jesus was an honored guest, being invited to eat at the table, it was customary that he would be shown certain acts of hospitality as he arrived. Simon's neglect of these duties of hospitality did not go unnoticed. In failing to honor Jesus with required expressions of hospitality, Simon's behavior was an insult to Jesus.⁷ Other guests who may already

have been present and those who were sitting around the walls would have noticed the failure of Simon to act as host to Jesus. The woman could have been one of these witnesses or perhaps she could have heard from someone who was there at the time when Jesus arrived.

The sinful (unclean) woman reached out to Jesus from her place by the wall and began to kiss and bathe his feet with ointment and her tears, and then dry his feet with her hair (vv. 37-38). Every one of her actions reverses one of the insults that Simon has inflicted on Jesus.⁸ Her behavior was outrageous. She not only touched Jesus' feet, but she had let her hair down in public, which was culturally prohibited. Since the Pharisees considered her unclean, her touch made Jesus unclean in their eyes. The host of this event saw the attention Jesus was receiving as reflecting badly on Jesus. He muttered to himself that if Jesus were truly a prophet he would know what kind of woman she was and would not let her touch him (v. 39).

Jesus responded to his host's criticism with a simple story about a creditor and two debtors, each forgiven of their debts. Jesus asked Simon, the Pharisee, an easy question: Which debtor would love the creditor more? Simon answered that the one whose debt was greater would love the creditor more. After affirming the answer Simon gave (vv. 40-43), Jesus brought the point of the story home and called to Simon's attention Simon's serious neglect of the requirements of hospitality.⁹ Jesus said:

Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. (vv. 44-47)

The appreciation Jesus expressed for hospitality was clear. Simon hadn't even seen the connection between his lack of hospitality and the woman's generous hospitality. Simon had no right to judge the woman when he had neglected to offer Jesus, his guest, the very basic hospitality that was expected. The sinful woman "showed up" the righteous Pharisee, and did so in his own home. Her hospitality offered Jesus the very basics that Simon had neglected to give to Jesus as his guest. She might not have kept all of the laws of the Torah, but she knew and demonstrated what truly counted.

Hospitality for Jesus

In Matthew we see further support for the very high importance given to hospitality in the Christian faith. Jesus described the final judgment. His description of separating out those who are blessed by God reflects the very basis for receiving blessings as acts of hospitality.

“. . . 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 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.” (Matt. 25:35-40)

Hospitality stands out as a crucial requirement for those who would follow Jesus. There is a surprise in this passage that we cannot miss. Here is another turnabout in which *Jesus becomes the guest* when we offer hospitality to one who is in need. What is the message here about hospitality?

We continue by examining the passages presented to discover some essential elements of hospitality. As we do so, we begin to create the foundation for the subsequent chapters of this book in which the connections between hospitality and listening will be defined. Each of the characteristics or elements—vulnerability, humility, thoughtful availability, and reciprocity—which can be seen as central to the practice of hospitality, is also central to the practice of effective listening. Seeing them through the eyes of valued hospitality, we discover these same values to be present in listening, as well.

The Four Core Qualities of Hospitality

Vulnerability

We see from the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Lot that offering hospitality involves vulnerability. Abraham and Lot were quick and

persistent in inviting strangers into their homes. We might assume that they shrewdly evaluated the strangers or saw some god/angel likeness in their demeanor, but the texts do not make this clear. Both Abraham and Lot greeted the strange men by bowing down to the ground and referring to them as lords. Lot and Abraham each referred to himself as “your servant.” Such greetings were a show of respect and not greetings reserved just for God or angels.

Lot and his family became vulnerable, facing danger because of the hospitality Lot offered to the strangers. His invitation and welcome placed him in a threatened position as their host. The danger was not from the strangers themselves, but from the response of the people of the city to the presence of the strangers and to Lot’s having offered them hospitality.

Perhaps Lot had himself experienced the antihospitable attitude of the people of Sodom. The men who came to take the strangers said of Lot, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge!” (Genesis 19:9). Obviously, he had not been welcomed as “one of them” by the people of Sodom. His experience prior to this particular evening might have warned Lot that the strangers would be treated badly if they remained in the square, and his invitation and welcome could have been extended with full awareness of the danger it might pose to him and to his family. As a “son of Abraham” Lot chose to do what was right. Hospitality can bring with it vulnerability to danger.

Danger such as Lot faced in offering hospitality is seen throughout history. People in danger are welcomed into homes even when the hosts recognize that the danger their guests face is likely to come on them. In Germany during the Holocaust, many Christians became traditionally the “sons and daughters of Abraham” when they took in and hid Jews whose lives were endangered. During slavery in America, persons who opened their homes to runaways and prepared their way on the Underground Railroad risked their own safety to enable slaves to travel toward freedom. In just these two examples we can see the amazing power of hospitality to draw people into danger in order to do what is expected by their faith—or just to do what they know is right.

We see another image of vulnerability in the woman who risked to offer Jesus hospitality. She reversed the indignity offered to Jesus by the Pharisee who was the host. She behaved outrageously. She placed herself at risk to offer the honor she was able to provide to one she very obviously saw as worthy of the deepest kind of hospitality possible. She made a spectacle of herself by her behavior. Her behavior also made a spectacle of Simon, the host. I envision the sneer on Simon’s face as he watched her,

seeing only her sinfulness, without recognizing that this woman was out-doing him in hospitality. She subjected herself to being seen as offensive by everyone present (except Jesus, of course). Her courage is impressive.

When we open our doors to strangers, we put ourselves and our loved ones at risk. When we open a tent flap, a door, or our heart to someone else, there is the potential of being hurt. We realize that there's a risk in being vulnerable. Hospitality (and the vulnerability it involves) does not happen without our openness to another—opening up to their presence and the impact it may have on our lives.

Sometimes it seems in America today we have a great emphasis on the fears that surround our lives. Children are warned not to speak to strangers. "Stranger danger" is involved when we are open to others whom we do not know well.¹⁰ Some persons who are strangers come with a friendly appearance and behavior that causes us not to identify them as strangers. (It has been shown that children are particularly vulnerable to friendly *appearing* strangers.) We cannot look at a person we do not know and reliably evaluate whether they are a threat or not. In offering hospitality, there are risks involved. Being open in any way makes us vulnerable.

Vulnerability takes other forms. When someone enters with need, we wonder whether their needs are genuine. We may worry about how we will be able to respond. We may be concerned about being found lacking in what they need from us and that we would fail in some way at hospitality. These possibilities also cause feelings of vulnerability. All of these feelings of vulnerability emerge beyond being wary about the stranger's intentions. Opening the door to the safety of our home ushers in vulnerability, for the one opening the door and for those who would enter as guests. Vulnerability, as we are open to others, opens us up to criticism, which we do not become vulnerable to when we remain closed.

Vulnerability is not for hosts alone. Guests also place themselves in positions of vulnerability when they accept the hospitality offered to them. How can they be sure that what is being offered will be what they actually will receive? Or will they be endangered by the one offering hospitality? Will accepting an invitation prove to be safe? In addition, when one receives hospitality, the one who is the guest may feel that there is a demand for repayment through a return invitation, for example. We have seen that hospitality is rewarded, but a sense of obligation does not seem to fit with a true understanding of hospitality. Hospitality as it is offered to those in need may involve guests who are not able to repay in a traditional sense.

Part of our struggle with feeling vulnerable comes from the recognition that being vulnerable may bring change. The lives of all of the biblical characters we have seen were dramatically changed. Abraham and Sarah became parents in their old age. Lot's family was rescued from their destroyed city and forced to relocate. The gracious woman in Luke experienced forgiveness and salvation. These are incredible life changes. We see again that vulnerability requires great courage. To face the risk of the unknown; to face the inevitability of change in one's life; and to do so freely is a challenge for any of us in our bravery quotient.

Humility

As we think about humility in hospitality, keep in mind that the discussion here is leading us to a fresh look at listening. What we see here about hospitality, we will later see as true about listening.

Offering hospitality involves humility on the part of both the host and the guest. In acts of hospitality the primary focus is on the one in need who will become the guest and recipient of the hospitality. By being the guest, humility is already part of the package. The guest is the one in need and the host is the one who has something the guest needs.

The host who welcomes the guest with arrogance and showiness violates the true nature of hospitality, and may be satisfying her or his need to receive appreciation from others. "Look! What a fine host!" is not the response one seeks when offering true hospitality. Hospitality is done with quietness and humility. Humility is in the recognition that what I have to offer is limited, and I recognize that even as a generous host I do not have everything my guests might need—or even everything I need myself.

Abraham and Sarah had long waited for the heir promised by God. They had given up on the promise without losing their faithfulness. Sarah's laughter when she hears the guests renew the promise reflects her long-past-hope condition. These two were clearly people standing in need even as they opened their tent to strangers in the desert. As people in need they also recognized that they had something to offer and that the strangers, at this point in time, needed what they could offer.

Abraham offered his guests a *morsel* of bread and a *little* water to wash their feet, and acknowledged that they would, of course, want to move on to their destination without further ado after they had rested and had a bit of nourishment. He was the very model of humility. The guests accepted his hospitality. Then Abraham burst into action *rushing* to get

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