

Sabbath Hospitality  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 16, 2022  
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Recently an unexpected package arrived in the mail, wrapped in a brown paper sack. Inside was a used copy of a book titled *Goatwalking* by Jim Corbett. The wrapping was evidence enough that it was probably a gift from my friend James. The title confirmed it.

If you're curious about the breed and number of goats whose milk will provide sufficient nutrition for a human to subsist on in the Sonoran Desert, this is the book for you. Personally, I hope never to have the need for such information. Nonetheless, I'm about halfway through the book, in part because of the unexpected pleasure I get from reading that a goat is "quick-witted, social, and educable, with a capacious, high-speed digestive system, a thorn-chewing mouth, cliff-climbing hooves, and a relatively indiscriminating appetite for low-grade roughage." I bet you can't wait to recommend this one to your book club, can you?

Well, you'll probably be relieved to hear that this isn't a sermon on the virtues of keeping goats. Another passage is what really hooked me. When Jim Corbett was still in his 20s, soon to move to the San Francisco Bay Area and become a Quaker, he was trying to decide whether to be a philosophy professor or a cowboy. He wanted to do something worthwhile with his life. So he spent a little time in the Arizona wilderness alone, reflecting. And he wrote this memo to himself:

On the prairie, when the wind wails a dirge and snow sifts in rivulets through the sagebrush, I've hugged the sticky-pink, death-chilled body of a newborn lamb under my coat, and its heart fluttered in reply. And on a desert mountain, amidst the hush of soaring granite, I've opened a forgotten spring. The few who remembered thought it had long ago gone dry, but I found the hidden place and dug down until a stream ran clear and cold in the summer sun. So what are epitaphs to me? I've shared life's warmth with a lamb. I've opened a desert spring.

Jim Corbett died more than forty years later. The plaque on the rock where his ashes were laid to rest reads: "Warmed a newborn lamb. Opened a desert spring."

A few years ago, David Brooks wrote a column in which he differentiated between eulogy virtues and resume virtues. He argued that we should live according to the virtues we'd like to be remembered for at our funerals (kindness, compassion, empathy) rather than the accomplishments we list on our resumes. Young Jim Corbett's memo to his older self goes a step further. It asks, What drives a person's life if his epitaph has been written before he's turned 30? What drives a life if it's neither resume nor eulogy virtues?

I'm coming to believe that the genius of parables is the way they get beneath the surface of our lives and explore what really drives us. And the stuff Jesus calls faith lives down in these deeper motivations, wouldn't you agree?

Today's parable is about "the need to pray always and not to lose heart," as the opening puts it. But the last sentence says that the way the widow in the story persisted with the judge is a form of the faith Jesus wants to find in all of us.

We tend to confuse faith with belief. Belief is part of it, of course. But, as Frederick Buechner once put it, believing that the earth orbits the sun and believing that your house is on fire are two very different experiences. Clearly Jesus is pointing us to the latter when he tells us of a widow who won't let a judge with no fear of God or respect for people dismiss her.

Which is pretty astonishing. This widow is demanding justice. She's demanding to be noticed and heard. But the reason widows show up in the Bible so often is not just because they'd suffered a loss. They lived in a society in which women and children were second class citizens. A widow's hope was to have a son who could take care of her since her world was mostly run by and made for men. So the widow's persistence before the uncaring judge sounds like Sojourner Truth when she said, "I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

That's the kind of faith Jesus wants to see in all of us. Faith that doesn't accept how the world values people, but believes in a human dignity imputed by God. Regardless of what one has done or owned or earned, which wouldn't have been much for the likes of a first century Jewish widow or a 19th century American Black woman. Women like these, defiantly claiming their dignity. That's faith, Jesus says.

But let's glance over at another parable in Luke that you might remember. We read it this summer. Back in chapter 11, Jesus told us about a man who knocks on a friend's door at midnight, asking for three loaves of bread, because a visitor has shown up at his house and he has no food to set before him. The groggy friend tells him to go away because he's already asleep. But the man keeps on knocking until his irritated friend relents, gets out of bed, and gives him the bread. Jesus says our faith should be as relentless as that man.

Do you see the similarity? Faith in that story was also persistence. It's also what drives us to set aside what the world's conventions say is good, polite, and appropriate and live according to the values and priorities of God. The widow's faith demands to be recognized as a person worthy of dignity and justice, even in a world that thinks she's unproductive burden, of no intrinsic value at all. The man banging on the door at midnight is in a different situation, but he wasn't asking for a late night snack for himself. He's horrified that someone has come to his own door and he had nothing to set before them. That's the dilemma that sets his faith to pounding on doors. The need to show hospitality to visitors.

So, if the two parables share an association of faith with persistence, they differ in what the situations are that kick this persistent faith into action. But they may be more closely related than we think. The Hebrews were a people of Sabbath. The seventh day, the seventh month, the seventh year, and the seven times seventh year all had increasing requirements to stop the systems of productivity and ownership and remember the gift by which humans and all creation lives. Living as a sabbath people meant remembering the Hebrews' identity as freed slaves who wandered in the wilderness dependent upon the daily gift of manna and the hospitality of strangers. "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but God brought you out from there..." the Hebrews told their children and their children's children. This was the defining memory that was to direct and order their lives.

Freed slaves without a homeland, who have lived by the daily gift of manna and the hospitality of strangers know that their worth is not a factor of what they own or produce or control. It's a gift. If that's your story, you'd be horrified too to be out of bread when a hungry stranger comes to your door, because you have been that stranger. If that's your story, a widow without a job or a shekel has every right to stand before a powerful judge and demand justice. Because you've lived in a land where you had no standing. But God saw you. And God delivered you.

Jesus was just telling us to live according to the values of Sabbath and hospitality, which are of a piece in the Hebrew story. Forget resume values. Forget eulogies and epitaphs too. Faith is having our lives be fired and ordered by a vision of Shalom Shabbat, Sabbath Peace. Where hospitality is the law, because human dignity is a given.

The values of Shalom Shabbat go deep in the way of life Torah lays out. But you'll probably remember that the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy aren't the most thrilling parts of the Bible to read. Because they deal with all kinds of mundane matters of everyday life. Like how to leave the corners of a field unharvested for poor foreigners, and what to do if your neighbor's donkey has fallen down on the road, and not to eat the fruit of a tree until it's five years old. A few laws involve goats. Shalom Shabbat is expressed in what is ordinary, visible, tangible, real.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be laying out the plans for Calvary's buildings and block. They have been unfolding for three years now. And as we do, we need to be able to answer for the deeper values they express in our everyday lives here in Memphis. And, as these parables emphasize, the questions that should drive us are questions like: Who is granted access and who is excluded? Who is granted dignity and a voice and who is judged? Are our spaces open only to insiders and the ones in control, or are they places of hospitality and welcome, laid out intentionally as safe spaces where people like that determined widow would see that she is valued and welcomed because of her inherent dignity as a child of God.

To this child of a woman who traveled through the world in a wheelchair for nearly half her life, that Calvary's communion rail might be accessible to people like my mother for the first time in this grand old building's history would be a beautiful instance Shalom Shabbat expressed in stone and iron.

The least defined aspect of the plans right now is what will happen around the site of the slave market that was active on Calvary's block in the mid 1800s. This is because we have invited outsiders to join us in our work — people from the Lynching Sites Project, a historian of art from the University of Memphis, and soon we hope to engage the creators of the I AM A MAN plaza, the UVA Enslaved Laborers Memorial, and the Ed Johnson Memorial in Chattanooga. We want them to help us answer questions like: What does Memphis need from this site and this story today? How can it be a place of truthfulness and solace, of hospitality and unease, a place of welcome to a stranger who maybe thought her story would never be told in a place like this one. A place where she'll see that her human dignity is assumed rather than one where she'll have to make her case persistently to another powerful, uninterested judge.

Those are just a couple of examples, but when Jesus tells us he wants us to be people whose lives are driven by Sabbath hospitality and a God-given human dignity that transcends resumes and eulogies alike, those values should show up not only in how we think and how we speak, but in what we do and maybe even in what we build. And if when we're finished, some of Jesus's people are still left outside, pounding the doors and pleading for their dignity, there will be more Shalom Shabbat work to be done. But if a few more of us find respite, dignity, welcome, access, inclusion in

this place ... well, those will be real measures of a faith that has become a little more alive, not just deep down in our hearts, but visibly and tangibly in our city. For this is a world whose healing, when it happens, still takes on the ordinary, everyday, physical forms of sabbath peace.