

The most hospitable people I've ever met are named Chuck and Shirley. Chuck and Shirley are a delightful couple, old friends of a pastor colleague of mine who live in a gorgeous home right on Lake Superior in Grand Marais, MN.

During my internship year of seminary, I realized that as much as I loved the experience of learning how to pastor in a large, suburban congregation, I needed some experience on what pastoring was like in a small town. So my colleague called up his friends in Grand Marais, Pastor Mark at Bethlehem Lutheran Church and Chuck and Shirley who lived in town, to set me up to learn small town pastoring for two weeks in that gorgeous town. I had absolutely no prior connection to Grand Marais, to Bethlehem Lutheran Church, and I had never even seen Lake Superior before in my life! (Lake Michigan seemed sufficient at the time, growing up in Milwaukee.)

But with one phone call, Chuck and Shirley agreed to totally open their home to me for two weeks as I learned from their pastor.

And what incredible hosts Chuck and Shirley were. Sure, within an hour of meeting them they asked me if I needed to find a fella to marry, what my deepest secrets were, and we talked about cults for a while, but their openness to me in their home and in conversation and sharing meals together was absolutely incredible. I still feel overwhelmed with gratitude when I think of my time with them.

Chuck and Shirley had never met me in person, but they loved the experience of hosting, and they opened their home to me because of the trust and love they had for my colleague, who recommended me. They still thought very fondly of the time my colleague served their congregation, and they were so supportive of all the pastor-types that came through town. It was like I inherited the gift of pastoral trust from these lovely people through the gifts of my colleague's ministry, and through Chuck and Shirley's gift of hospitality.

Inheritance is the gift that comes from hospitality in Jesus' words in today's Gospel. Jesus says to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes

me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Whoever welcomes the disciples welcomes Christ into their homes. And whoever welcomes Christ into their homes, welcomes God, the one who sent Christ Jesus into our world.

When we welcome God into our homes, our lives, when we show hospitality to Christ, we open ourselves up to the whole myriad of gifts that a life in Christ provides for us. It may lately have seemed like a life following Christ and Christ’s commandments is a lot of heavy work. And it certainly is at times, that work of following Christ, of loving God and our neighbors is a lot of work. But like the work of hospitality, it is out of sharing the abundance and goodness we have and for the love of whom we host, that we put forth in our work of faith.

This work of faith is not in order to earn God’s love. In fact, God has already given us the absolute greatest gift, as Paul writes in our Romans text today: you are not under law but under grace. Praise the Lord!

What being under grace means is that we are free then to do loving things in the world and truly love God and one another freely. It’s not a requirement for being saved - we are already saved by Jesus’ sacrifice and God’s great love for us. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, Jesus brings the promises of eternal life, the promises of new life to us all. Out of great love for us, Jesus took on our sins in his death on the cross and from that death of the old ways, the old power of sin that held us captive and in fear, we are then made new, we are made free in his rising again, in the newness of life of Christ Jesus.

Grace, at its roots, is a combination of love and forgiveness. The ultimate love and forgiveness we receive is from Christ Jesus. We are free from the power of anything that tries to separate us from the love of God. We are free from any torment or pain in our spirits - we must simply call upon our

life-saving God of grace and goodness and love, and by the very power of God, we are able to live in powerful freedom.

This freedom is not something we earn, it is something we are innately born with. The love of God is already within us by the promises of the Holy Spirit made to us in baptism. The forgiveness of God is already given to us by Jesus' sacrifice and the new life given in His resurrection. The gift that we inherit from Christ's death and resurrection is this unending grace, and the freedom that comes with it.

Sometimes this freedom feels like a lot. When we are in the throes of challenging times or mental health struggles or illnesses or recognizing our mistakes, internal biases, or the ways we may have hurt one another, pretty much the last thing we think about is how deserving we are of love. But we need to accept that deep and enduring truth, that we are worthy of the unending love of God. We are worthy of love. Every single one of us, at our most human cores and hearts, no matter what we do or do not do, is worthy of love. And God gives us this love, even when we can't find it in ourselves to love who we are. God gives us love, even when it feels like we are unlovable or unloved by the people around us. Love means you never give up on who you love. And so this is the truth of God's love for us - God will never abandon or forsake us, God will never give up on us.

When we recognize this love in ourselves, and our spirits are strengthened by the truth of God's love, we then act from this place of love. We embody Christ's love in ourselves and in our actions, because that love is woven into all of who we are. As the whole body of Christ in this world, from this place of freedom, we are free to share this grace and hospitality with all people. And this is the work we must do. We are free to welcome people in the name of Jesus but we have to be the ones who do the work of loving kindness. We cannot just expect people to come to us - we have to actively shine forth this love. It is not a requirement of grace but rather what we are compelled to do, to share the love of Christ in all we do.

And so these hospitable acts of ministry look different these days, as we are physically distanced, dismantling old and oppressive systems, and building new ones that better support our neighbors and communities. Be creative in how you disciple, in how you follow the call to welcome our siblings in Christ. Help a lonely friend by calling them for a chat or sending a card. Do some intentional listening and learning from folks whose lives are different from ours, due to their skin color, who they love, whatever background they come from that may be different from your own. Donate to causes that support loving our neighbors and keeping them alive. And actively show up for the people you love as you are able to. Jesus calls his disciples to go out into the world to share His love, not to expect people will come to them. And so we too must live out our calling to love and welcome in the world as well.

Above all else, dear friends in Christ, be hospitable to people for exactly who they are. Welcome the identities and experiences and stories of people different from you into your home and into your life. And don't be afraid to accept the hospitality of others too - when we learn in new places and communities, we must listen and be fed by the experiences of others too. Though the conversations and relationships may be different than what we anticipate, we inherit the gift of God's love when we put ourselves out there in connection with one another. We grow both when we serve and are served by others. These actions of hospitality, of love and curiosity help to affirm the humanity and worth of every person, and that is a radical act of love for our neighbors, and the loving God who created us all. Thanks be to God, Amen.