

Commemorating the Town of Brookeville's Bicentennial
U. S. Capital For A Day
"Offering Hospitality: Then and Now"
Leviticus 19:33-34; Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 13:1-3
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Today we remember and give thanks to the residents of the Town of Brookeville whose hospitality was offered to everyone, no matter of their rank or status, and with this humble act of caring for strangers, their kindness may have saved our nation two hundred years ago. Little did they know that in offering hospitality to strangers, they would be the nation's capital for one day as they provided shelter and protection to the fourth president of the United States, James Madison.

The year 1814 was a tumultuous time for those living along the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Britain and the United States had been at war for two years. The British forces were larger and better trained than the ones of our new country. Battle hardened British warships came up the Chesapeake and traveled up its tributaries. Washington, the nation's capital on the Potomac River was a strategic target. If the British could overtake the capital and destroy its government, they could possibly defeat the former colonies and regain British sovereignty. So they burned all the government buildings in the nation's capital. One can only imagine the fear that gripped the hearts of the people of Washington and our national leaders when they received word of the British invasion. Escape to save one's life and to protect the government seemed to be the only option. Thousands streamed out of the city looking for refuge and safety. Many found their way to this small, rural town. Taking only what they could carry with them, they encountered several thunderstorms and arrived in Brookeville afraid, exhausted, wet, hungry and unsure of the future. Would they ever be able to return to their homes? How would they survive? In this quiet Quaker town, they were offered hospitality. Doors were opened to receive them. Food was served. Space was created for them to rest. The calm manner of the Quakers eased their fears.

Many in the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, in the early nineteenth century would have been students of the Bible. Throughout the Scriptures there are commands to offer hospitality, stories about offering hospitality, and reminders to offer hospitality. Did the words from Leviticus, Matthew, or Hebrews illuminate the Inner Light of the Friends in this rural town? Would they have remembered the Levitical law that Moses gave the recently freed Israelites? "When strangers sojourn with you, don't take advantage of them. You shall treat them as your own. Remember you were once strangers in Israel. I am the Lord your God." Variations of this phrase are repeated over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures. Why would God remind humanity repeatedly of their responsibility to care for a foreigner, an immigrant, an alien, a stranger? These are all terms used in various biblical translations of this verse. Why would God reiterate to humanity to care for a stranger who needs the basics in life: shelter, food, security? Because God is aware of the inhospitality of the human spirit. God is aware that left to the selfish nature of the human heart, we will care only for ourselves, for those who are like us, for our families and friends, and ignore the stranger in need. Thus, God gives this command as law: "You will not harm strangers, but love him them as yourself." This command was made for humanity so we can see that everyone no matter what their circumstances, status, culture, or race is loved by God. We need to be reminded repeatedly that we are not the only ones that God loves. In addition, this command also reminds us about the nature of God. In this passage of Leviticus, God reminds the Israelites that they were once recipients of God's hospitality when they were refugees in Egypt. They sojourned to Egypt because of a famine. While they were there, the Egyptians conscripted them into slavery. God heard their cries for help, rescued

them, and cared for them in the wilderness. God saved them, protected them, and provided for them. Offering hospitality stems from the heart of who God is. God's hospitality saves, protects, and provides for all humanity. In this Levitical law God is saying, "Remember who I am and what I have done for you. Remember how I offered hospitality to you and pay it forward."

In the New Testament, Jesus, as the Son of God, comes to live with humanity as a stranger. First, he enters this inhospitable world homeless. At his birth, his parents relied on others for their sustainability. As an adult, Jesus is homeless again as an itinerant rabbi, going from town to town, relying on the hospitality of others for shelter and food. Much of Jesus' ministry occurred at the table of others, blessing and breaking bread that was provided. Yet, at the same time hospitality was offered to Jesus, he offers hospitality to all humanity, inviting everyone regardless of their circumstances, status, culture, or race into God's home. All who are worn, all who are weary, all who are lost, all who are grieving, and all who are hurting can find comfort and refuge in the home of God. At the same time Jesus was being invited into people's homes, he was inviting them into God's home, an eternal place of refuge and security.

For Jesus, offering hospitality is more than meeting physical needs, but meeting spiritual ones as well. The Quakers believe that God places an Inner Light in each person. The Gospel of Matthew has Jesus saying that we are the light of the world. Jesus also said that He is the Light of the World. The term, "light" refers to the spiritual aspects placed by God in each human. The Creation Story in Genesis 1 states that the image of God is placed in each person. If each of us has the image of God placed in us, then each of us is the light of the world, and by offering hospitality to another we are offering Light to another and honoring the Image of God in another. It is the Christ in me that greets the Christ thee. Offering hospitality is saying every person on this planet is family. What is mine is yours, because it is not mine. It belongs to God. This is the point of the parable in Matthew 25. Jesus says, "When one does it to the least of these, you do it to me." Jesus, the Light; Jesus, the Image of God on earth, is in each person. When we care for another, we are caring for God.

In our 21st century American culture, hospitality usually does not imply protection or survival. Hospitality for us is a commodity we expect at hotels, restaurants, or resorts. Hospitality has become an industry dedicated to taking care of the customer. No request is too small to keep the paying customer happy. In ancient cultures and even in current cultures, hospitality offered to those in need was not a paid service, but a matter of survival. Many today are in desperate need of the basics in life: food, water, shelter, and safety. They are strangers, immigrants, and refugees who have lost their community, their tribe, their city, and for some, even their nation. Without an offer of hospitality, their lives and futures are at risk. God hears their cries. God weeps with them. As God searched and called Moses to rescue the Israelites, God is searching and calling people today to offer hospitality to the strangers among us. We often make offering hospitality into a political issue, but it really is a spiritual one. Do we see the Inner Light, the Image of God, the Christ in those who are strangers, hungry, thirsty, and frightened? What is the status of the human spirit in the 21st Century? Is it hospitable, in keeping with those who lived in Brookeville two hundred years ago? Or is it inhospitable, in need of a reminder that God has offered hospitality to us as an offer of grace, not as an offer of *quid pro quo*? There is not an exchange of payment for God's hospitality. The Giver does not expect anything in return. God's grace is given to us out of God's heart of love. There is no expectation to pay it back, but there is the expectation to offer this grace, to pay it forward to strangers in need.