

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Hospitality”

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“And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

Every year at this time, somebody sues a city or town because of the nativity scene in front of city hall. Usually the nativity scenes in question are made of cheap plastic with fading paint, but the Knights of Columbus or some other group has been putting them up for years and they’ve become a part of the city’s tradition. You know what happens. An individual or group is offended. The local newspaper picks up on it; lots of letters to the editor. A lawsuit is threatened, outside groups get involved, and the city simply removes the nativity to avoid an expensive legal battle. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are replaced by Santa, Rudolf and a few elves and a sign that says “Happy Holidays”.

This year, it’s our own state capital in the news. A conservative group put up a small nativity scene in the rotunda. I saw it on Tuesday. Jesus is just a few inches long, but that’s a few inches too long for the folks at the Freedom from Religion Foundation who found it all very distressing. They responded with their own nativity on the other side of the rotunda with a little black, baby girl doll lying in the manger and a sign wishing everyone “Heathen’s Greetings.” Their manger scene tries very hard to be witty and irreverent and, in their own words, “a little blasphemous” but mostly it’s just meaningless. At first I thought to myself, only in Madison. But actually that’s not true, is it? It’s the new normal across the country. And you know what? It’s okay; it’s not the end of the world. Your faith and mine doesn’t need to be propped up with plastic manger scenes, nor does the removal of those manger scenes change the fact that 2,000 years ago, for you, for me, a Savior was born in Bethlehem. The birth of that baby, that flesh and blood baby . . . the implications of it are huge, far greater than whether or not there’s a plastic Jesus lying around in front of city hall. The Freedom from Religion Foundation can rant if they want, but I’d rather sing Christmas carols, and hear again the narrative from Luke 2, and light some candles and feel hopeful about the future and give thanks to God for that hope we have in Christ. Besides, this new environment of hostility toward Jesus really isn’t new at all. In fact, it’s more reflective of the way things are most everywhere else in the world. And it’s more reflective of the hospitality (or, better said, inhospitality) shown Jesus 2000 years ago.

On a cold night, long ago, after an exhausting journey, a man knocks on the door of a Bethlehem inn. The young woman with him is very pregnant. The contractions have already begun. They must have shelter. But the inn of Bethlehem is full. Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor at the time, has issued a decree that a census should be taken. It’s necessary information for the purposes of taxation and military service. Historians tell us pulling this off was one of the things of which Augustus was most proud. In any event, as a result of his orders, the entire Mediterranean world is on the move, each family returning to the town of their origin so an

accurate count can be taken. Therefore the inn of Bethlehem is full, as are all the inns in that part of the world.

The innkeeper can offer nothing other than the shed out back where he keeps his animals. (Scholars suggest it might have been a cave.) In any event, it's there that the woman gives birth to the baby and "they laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Those are among the saddest words in Scripture. Had Joseph flashed some serious money, you can bet a room would have been found. But Joseph doesn't have serious money, and so the infant is placed in a saliva encrusted feed bin.

"Shame on you wretched Bethlehem" Luther thundered in a Christmas sermon. "The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone." But then Luther brings it closer to home. "There are many of you in this congregation" he said, "who think to yourselves, 'If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby!' . . . Why don't you do it now?" Luther asks. "You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him as you would Jesus."

The world's hospitality for Jesus would get worse. You recall King Herod doesn't like it at all when the mysterious magi from the East show up at his palace asking "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Herod thought he was king in those parts . . . and he's not ready to relinquish his authority. Those in positions of power and authority generally want to hold on to their power and authority, and many are willing to do what it takes. So the tyrant of North Korea is in office until he breathes his last. Ballot boxes are stuffed in Russia. Political dissidents are imprisoned in Cuba. Sensitive inquiries on the internet are shut down in China. Cell phone networks are turned off in Syria. Those in authority usually like to retain their authority and are often willing to take steps toward that end. And so a new born baby in Bethlehem is whisked away by his parents to save the child's life. They travel all the way to Egypt and go into hiding. So much for the world's hospitality!

Time passes. Herod dies. The family returns. The boy grows up in Nazareth. When he's about thirty years of age he leaves Nazareth and starts preaching and teaching all around Galilee. Large crowds follow him, in part because of his dazzling miracles, in part because of his teaching and preaching. But not everyone likes what he is saying. The religious authorities certainly don't. They too find him threatening to their status quo. So they harass and pester and try to entrap him every chance they get. There's no room for him in their inn either.

And do you remember the time when he healed the man named legion in the area of the Decapolis? In the process he cost the town a whole herd of pigs. You can look it up. So the people plead with him to leave. There's no room for him there, either. And the thing is, he does. The Savior gets in the boat and shoves off. He will not stay where he is not welcomed. He forces himself on no one.

Once Jesus went back to his home town of Nazareth, and not even his home town had room for him anymore. They drove him out of town and tried to throw him over a cliff. To our knowledge, he never went back.

And how about that time when he told the crowds, "I am the bread of life . . . Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." These were strange words, and the crowd didn't understand them. Normally we don't like that which we don't understand. Calculus comes to mind. And so the crowds started turning away from this Jesus whom they no

longer understand. Once they had room for him in their lives; now they don't.

And before long, the crowds in Jerusalem are shouting "Crucify him!" Pilate had his men do exactly that. You might say crucifying a guy is the exact opposite of offering him hospitality. Crucifixion is the ultimate form of inhospitality. And the message? "There's no room for you on this earth. We don't want you here."

Wherever he goes, it seems, it's often the same message. "We don't want you here. There's no room for you here." At the inn of Bethlehem, in front of city hall, in the capitol rotunda, and often in our own hearts, and on our calendars . . . "there's no room for you here."

Yale Law Professor Stephen Carter said the prevailing attitude toward Christianity in America is like our attitude toward model trains or any other hobby. It's fine, as long as you don't take it too seriously. And you really ought to keep it to yourself.

And so we do. We lock him up tight. Embarrassed by him, we pack him away like we pack away our own nativity sets at home. For most of the year then, he is nowhere to be seen. We forbid him from entering our conversations. We prohibit him from swaying our decisions or influencing our choices. We put a restraining order on him to keep him at a safe distance. In effect, we point him to the shed out back and say, "there's no room for you in here, but if you want, I suppose you can stay out there." That is, until an emergency unfolds. Then we storm the gates of heaven with our prayers and wonder what's taking so long. "Why me?" we ask. "What did I ever do to earn this?" And we demand that he justify his himself before us."

Hospitality. How hospitable are you toward Jesus?

In C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the person of Jesus is represented by Aslan, the lion. The children are told they will soon meet Aslan. Susan isn't so sure she likes the idea. "Is he – quite safe?" she asks. "Safe?" comes the reply. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good." Still today, for all our efforts, we have not been able to make God safe. He's a lion that still has his claws and his teeth. And, for all our efforts, he's a lion that refuses to be tamed. What a lot of people do, then, is try to keep their distance. Graciously, he doesn't always cooperate.

You recall it was the Lord who took the initiative and sought out Adam and Eve who were hiding from him, trying to keep their distance. In Revelation 3, Jesus says, "I stand at the door and knock". Many want nothing to do with him. They try to ignore his knocking and refuse to let him in. But he keeps coming back and keeps knocking. He doesn't break the door down, but he also doesn't take a hint. And every so often, someone will unlock the door. Or, more accurately, someone dismantles the barricade and reluctantly says, "Ok, you can come in now." In either case "Where meek souls will receive Him, still The dear Christ enters in." (LSB 361 v. 4). And to the one who receives him, Jesus has a great promise. "In my father's house are *many* rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you." That is, we might have little space for him, little hospitality, but in his heart and in his heaven, there's quite enough room and love for us!

Such is the grace of God and the hospitality of Jesus. As an adult, we see him welcoming sinners into his company . . . prostitutes and tax collectors. He eats with them, tells them of God's love. He does not keep *them* at arm's length. Similarly, when the prodigal son finally returns, his father does not throw him a cold shoulder. He throws him a feast.

Also in the parable of the wedding banquet, we glimpse God's hospitality. Those the

king had invited chose not to come. So he tells his servants to invite anyone they can find, both the good and the bad. (I love the part . . . “both the good and the bad”). And the king’s hall is filled with guests. (I love that part too.)

His is a hospitality that took you in at the baptismal font, adopted you. On that day, it’s as if he said to you, “You’re mine now. I’m going to love and care for you. I will be with you. I will forgive you, and will never let you go. Even during your faithless years I will remain faithful to you.”

He’ll take in the whole world if the world would let him. On the cross he shed his blood not for a select few but for a world of sinners. And not just for a world of sinners, but also, very specifically, for you as an individual. No matter who you are or what you’ve done, no matter your shortcomings and failures, there’s room and welcome for you at the manger in Bethlehem. And not just to peek over the shepherds’ shoulders. No, there’s room and welcome for you in the tiny heart of that newborn infant lying in the manger. Amen.

“Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee” (TLH 85, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” v. 13
by Martin Luther.)