

The Power of Hospitality

On a bright, Sunday morning long decades ago, I walked for the first time into the coffee hour of an Episcopal church in Chicago. I was a new and nervous associate rector in this parish, and an equally new and nervous graduate student at the University of Chicago. Worship went well on my first Sunday, and I was eager to meet parishioners over coffee. The next day, Monday morning, classes would begin at the U. of C. It was a time of anxious anticipation.

Upon entering the coffee hour, I received warm welcomes from various people; then an older man approached. He cut in front of several people to extend his hand and offer a loud greeting. “Hello, I’m Bob,” he declared.

Bob was instantly memorable. He wore an old, charcoal suit with a double-breasted coat, its pocket crammed with pens and pencils. Long, dense white hair swept past his shoulders; a few fallen strands and much dandruff marked his jacket. The imprint of various meals stained his tie and his aging white shirt had a brownish tint with loose threads dangling from the neck.

Bob’s trademark was his smile; it was so intense it could hypnotize. As I stared, he pointed to a nearby urn and asked: “Coffee?” Before I could answer, he dashed off, hair flapping from the speed of his motion. Soon, shouldering other people aside, Bob returned, thrusting a cup of coffee toward me. “When you’re

ready, come over and talk,” he added, then darted away. This was not the sort of introduction I had imagined.

But I was game. As the crowd diminished, I drifted toward a far wall. Bob was sitting there with his wife, her Parkinson’s disease apparent. Yet she sipped coffee and smiled toward Bob. As I reached him, others did as well. A small line formed to thank Bob for one thing or another. It was fascinating.

Who was Bob? When I was able to ask, he smiled broadly. “Well, I help in the soup kitchen and I tutor kids in the housing project. I drive some people to doctors’ appointments and I drive some to church. And I bring coffee.” With that he laughed loudly. Then Bob added: “They let me have an office at the University of Chicago. When you’re on campus let’s have lunch. I’m in the physics department.” Then, helping his wife to her feet, Bob was gone.

So began my discovery of an extraordinary life; the life of a truly loving, giving, and eccentric genius. A man who ceaselessly moved at top speed with good cheer all the time. A man who had an unusually powerful reason for wanting to serve people. A man who left an imprint on human life that he worked hard to revise. A man who knew more than most of us will ever know about the reality of good and evil. A man with profound faith in God. Above all, a man for whom hospitality and kindness meant the world, literally.

By the age of 25, Robert J. Moon had earned doctoral degrees in chemistry and physics from the University of Chicago. By the time he was 30, Bob Moon was part of a small group of scientists working in a quiet campus corner. Bob's research supplied crucial theory for what would be the world's first nuclear reactor, launched at the University of Chicago in December 1942. Then Bob Moon was whisked away, eventually to a secret desert installation. There he and other scientists detonated the first atomic bomb in 1945. He was barely 34.

The rest of Bob Moon's life was a spiritual response to that searing experience. He was one of the creators of the most terrible weapon. Then he dedicated his life to finding peaceful uses of atomic energy. Even more, he worked, humbly and quietly, to serve people in daily life. Always with a smile, often with a laugh. Few people knew the story. Not the homeless or hungry, not the kids trying to learn high school math, not the people he drove to doctors and to church. He was the odd man in the aged suit with the long white hair. He talked ceaselessly and greeted everyone warmly. He asked many to pray for him.

Late in life, fringe political groups tried to enlist him. Bob knew a great deal, but he had no political instinct. His conversations were about serving others, about his love of God, and about ways to use atomic energy peacefully. In a way Bob was naïve. He liked everybody, and was obsessed with doing good. Welcoming and helping people in any way were his calling cards.

We should never assume we know what will happen at a church coffee hour; or for that matter at a wedding banquet. We Virginians are well versed at social occasions; we do coffee hours and weddings and all sorts of occasions with style. We know there are people we must greet, and a few we must thank. We may dare to think that some people owe us invitations and greetings; the social equation can become complex, with subtle signs of who owes what to whom. But Virginia is not the only place for such social calculus. We glimpse similar considerations in Jesus' day as people jockeyed for position at a wedding banquet. Who will sit where; who must be addressed; who owes whom. It can tie one's mind in knots. But Jesus cut right through it, in Luke's gospel.

Do not presume the place of honor, Jesus said. When you are invited, take the lowest place. Do not seek to exalt yourself; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Even more, don't simply invite those to whom you feel a social obligation. Invite the outcast, those who cannot repay you. In other words, use an ordinary occasion to model an extraordinary idea: the reality that all of us are God's people; all of us are welcome; all of us can and must be included.

What is this about? It is about our calling to create on earth the beginning of God's eternal kingdom. The kingdom that lies beyond this life and all the kingdoms of this earth. The kingdom where all people are equal, regardless of race

or religion or age or gender or any other distinction. Because we are all equal, we are all worthy. Regardless of our politics or our nationality, regardless of how we look or where we have been or what we have done. Our calling, as people of faith, is to bring to life this ideal of being equals, co-inheritors of God's eternal love.

It is more than common courtesy, as important as that is. It is more than honoring our friends and neighbors, as necessary as that can be. It is about honoring all people. And even more: working to build ties among all people. When we see life through the eyes of faith, we see more than social moments. We see occasions for building ties that can bind us together. Even at a church coffee, we must test a new way to be together, with sensitivity and with God's grace.

It's not easy. All of us bring our own, overwhelming personal issues. We are slow to reveal our burdens, fearing that somehow we are alone in a sea of happy faces. We are slow to hear what other people are saying, given all the thoughts that preoccupy us. We are quick to feel overlooked or to misunderstand what is said. We revert to standard social behavior, burying all that troubles us. And we depart from one another not grasping how much we need to be together, how much this simple moment can signal acceptance from God. Here we can find divine love.

This was Bob Moon's motivation. He understood the gospel of Luke. And he practiced what we have heard from the letter to the Hebrews. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels

without knowing it.” Bob’s complex life was not motivated simply by guilt, nor by sheer courtesy. Bob was driven to find a constructive pathway, and he found it in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. He understood that in small, daily ways, we are called to build God’s kingdom. We humans have no other way forward.

So we must learn to see life as Bob Moon saw it: not as the subatomic particles outlined by complex mathematical formulations. Few will ever grasp that vision. Instead, to discover that we can abandon our destructive impulses and give up all that divides us. We can come together, through service to one another, through ordinary acts of kindness and hospitality, presuming that we actually are entertaining angels. In short, we must learn to see that God can act through us, in even the most normal circumstances. The ordinary can become extraordinary, and our lives can change course for the good of all, when we dare to show God’s love to one another.

Amen

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