Introduction

The award winning foreign language film *Babette’s Feast* is a captivating and compelling portrait of the transformational power of lavish hospitality. The film tells the story of two women – daughters of a rigidly pious minister whose home is always open for worship but not for love. A stranger named Babette escapes from war-torn France to the sisters’ village in Denmark and asks to live in their home and serve them without any expectations of wages. (famous chef) After a period of 13 years, the stranger wins a lottery in France and is sent a prize of 10,000 francs. She uses all the money she has received to purchase the ingredients to prepare a sumptuous feast for the sisters and their quarrelsome congregation. The feast costs her everything, but the congregational members (who have been most contentious and unforgiving toward each other) discover the joy of sharing kindness and love as they enjoy Babette’s hospitality. In many ways, the film can be viewed as a metaphor for selfless hospitality – the type of hospitality embodied in an incarnational God.

- Let’s view this film clip – which focuses on the aftermath of the gourmet feast generously provided by Babette to the sisters and their congregation. The film clip begins with two women who have been contrary with each other – notice how their attitudes have changed
because of Babette’s generous hospitality. Watch and observe the changes all of the characters experience because of Babette.

I am a child of the city – I was born in Brooklyn – raised in Queens and Long Island. My grandparents immigrated to New York from Germany in the 1920’s. As a young child I listened to their stories of courage and struggle and of the strangers who welcomed them to a new city – a new country – indeed, a new way of life. From my grandparents, I learned about the privilege of serving as both host and guest. I often sat on my grandparents’ laps as they told me their stories of arriving at Ellis Island – of the hospitality extended to them by complete and total strangers. It was generous hospitality that enabled them to find work as house servants, to learn a new language, to make a home in a place where the culture was completely foreign to them. As I grew up, I watched my grandparents and my parents extend hospitality by always opening their homes to others. Family members, friends, and neighbors frequently stopped by unannounced, and we were always ready to provide a meal or at least a cup of coffee and an Entenmann’s cake!! (you know – the cake in the box) I was taught that one should offer the best food and drink to any guest – regardless of status or affinity. From my family, I learned that hospitality was more than just physical sharing – the sharing was also personal and communal. I learned to cherish common meals and gatherings with relatives as times of infectious laughter, thoughtful conversation, raucous argument
(especially about politics) and spirited play. (Tell story of Kelly’s first visit home with me) We hospitably embraced each other and each other’s opinions without reservation or judgment. This is an example we have tried to model in our own nuclear family, with our daughter, Brooke, and our extended circle of friends and family.

Early in life, I also developed a passion for learning. My brothers enjoy describing in detail the manner in which I tortured them into playing school when we were kids. Although I had the benefit of a loving family, our home life was often filled with uncertainty and conflict – the results of my late father’s lifelong struggle with alcoholism and untreated bipolar disorder. In order to escape ongoing tensions at home, I totally immersed myself in school. Teachers were my encouragers and affirmers – they were my role models and agents of God’s grace to me. I wanted to be that type of role model for students, so I pursued higher education with the goal of teaching at the collegiate level. For me, the subject matter was not as salient as the dynamics of the learning process itself. I pursued studies in the discipline of Communication because of my interest in pedagogy. I wanted to gain an understanding of the ways in which language and nonverbal communication shape people’s reality. I wanted to learn alongside my students as we discovered how communication was used to promote understanding and unity rather than confusion and division. Together we discovered the truth of Martin Luther King,
Jr.’s words, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny.”

So, I pursued a Ph.D in Rhetorical Studies, taught at Malone College, and learned to apply my knowledge of the communication discipline through a variety of leadership roles I have been fortunate to fulfill at Malone College and Messiah. In many ways, I never intentionally sought leadership roles but leadership has sought me. As opportunities have been made available to me, I have attempted to fulfill them with competence and compassion. And I have experienced tremendous satisfaction and joy in fulfilling those roles.

In the past few years as I have been reflecting on my life as an administrator, teacher, family member, and person of faith, I have come to understand the importance of practicing hospitality. Because communication is so central to hospitality, it seems natural for me to develop such a keen interest in the topic. In a time of intense conflict in our world, our nation, the Church and even on our own campus, the restoration of the Biblical practice of hospitality possesses the potential of increasing understanding between people and promoting reconciliation. For me, rediscovering the concept of hospitality has transformed my thinking about teaching, scholarship, leadership and Christian faith.
Definition of Hospitality

So, just what is this idea of hospitality? Hospitality is the gracious welcoming of the other into one’s domain. It is the welcoming of the person in all of his or her uniqueness and fullness as a human being – it is an act of what Joan Chittister described as a “recklessly generous heart.” In Biblical times, hospitality was shaped by the dusty, rugged terrain of the Middle East and the need for travel. People were mutually dependent on each other for food and shelter in ways that it is difficult for our “Hilton Hotel and Motel 6” culture to comprehend. Throughout the Scriptures – from Abraham to Paul, there are numerous examples of Biblical hospitality and of course Matthew 25 is the core passage about hospitality – “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” – the kind of hospitality that permeated people’s souls and shaped their identities and their religious faith. Hospitality recognizes the worth of the stranger, and it emphasizes our common humanity. Hospitality enables us to comprehend that strangers are individuals who feel disconnected from basic relationships – they can be from far-away lands but strangers can also be our colleagues, students, and neighbors. Hospitality compels us to reach out to others because as Christians we believe in the imago dei – every individual is created in God’s image and worthy of respect.

The most important example of hospitality is the incarnation itself. Jesus entered the world as a stranger and modeled what it meant to be both host and guest. Jesus
came to live in our midst – to eat and drink with us – to laugh and cry with us – to teach and learn with us. Jesus paid special attention to the marginalized and the poor. Jesus paid special attention to the lonely and the disaffected. Jesus is the link that binds all of us to each other. Therefore, the practice of hospitality must cross social, ethnic, class, and religious boundaries and encourage the formation of community. Henri Nouwen reminds us that hospitality is a “fundamental attitude toward our fellow human beings.” It connotes the idea that guests carry precious gifts with them – that through meaningful interaction a humble host will learn from and be edified by her guest.

I believe that Christian academic communities such as Messiah must rediscover two distinct facets of hospitality if our mission is to be fulfilled – intellectual and spiritual hospitality.

**Intellectual hospitality**

Parker Palmer has critiqued the academy as a “culture infamous for fragmentation, isolation and competitive individualism – a culture in which community feels harder to come by than any other institution on earth.”

Although almost every college and university in the United States employs the term “community” to describe their campus cultures – we know that community is
rarely attained behind the ivory towers of academia. In the Jacobsens’ recently published volume entitled *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, I argued that intellectual hospitality is critical to a liberal and applied arts and sciences education and to the nurturing of Christian community. “Intellectual hospitality involves the virtue of epistemological humility which roots our openness to the views of others in the recognition that our own mental powers are limited and that the cognitive, experiential and affective insights of others, especially when they are different from our own, can truly deepen and extend our understanding of others and the world which surrounds us. Intellectual hospitality is not just a matter of being civil to other people in an academic setting; it is a methodology of inquiry that humbly assumes that we can learn as much (or more) from those with whom we disagree as we can from those with whom we agree.” In his book on *Academic Hospitality*, John Bennett suggested that intellectual hospitality is not just a virtue to which we should aspire – intellectual hospitality is an epistemological necessity. The pursuit of scholarship – the analysis of problems – the development of solutions – the making of art requires us to possess humble and teachable spirits. It is too easy for any one of us to cling to our own biases and prejudices unless we authentically listen to and learn from the voices of others. It is too easy to overlook evidence or dismiss opposing ideas. Therefore, in classroom discussions, in chapel, in conversation, in the pursuit of scholarship, we must nurture and practice intellectual hospitality.
Now, I want to be very clear that I am not arguing for the abandonment of core beliefs or moral and ethical standards. I am contending that hospitality is an “argument for rigor but hospitably rather than negatively construed.” I am suggesting that we are a community of pilgrims on a journey toward the discovery of knowledge and understanding and that journey is never fully concluded. Therefore, we must listen carefully to and learn all that we can from each other. And listening takes effort

- can’t be distracted by our own argument
- can’t gunnysack
- can’t give less than a full hearing

What are the implications of practicing intellectual hospitality in the Christian educational community and in our classrooms? The goal of Christian higher education is to prepare students to live as faithful Christians committed to fulfilling their vocations. Monika Hellwig, Executive Director of the Association of American Catholic Colleges and Universities, claimed that the goal of higher education in terms of Christianity is not preparing students for the moment of their graduation but for the moment of their death. “Students should be drawn into a lifetime engagement in search of the reign of God.” We have a responsibility to ensure that students are being nurtured and challenged to live hospitably in a
global, diverse twenty-first century world. This responsibility cannot be fulfilled if we do not invite “strangers” – people who possess different perspectives – experiences – religious beliefs as conversation partners to engage us in salient conversations. (ex: commitments re: hiring – Muslims, Jews...)

Much of the thinking about Christian higher education has focused significant attention on the definition and preservation of boundaries. I believe we need to focus more concerted attention on how to embody our mission to live consistently as a faith-based educational communities. Rather than concentrating attention solely on the content of what we are teaching or the issues we are discussing, we need to concentrate on developing hospitable attitudes and approaches to facilitating of those discussions and debates. Christian higher education should be defined by the ways in which Christian colleges and universities seek to embody a gracious, hospitable form of Christianity, as opposed to mere doctrinal boundaries or behavioral codes.

Intellectual hospitality also has significant implications for the classroom. If we understand hospitality to be a way of drawing out each other’s gifts and capacities – then, the hospitable classroom will be a place of affirmation, engagement, and discovery. In a marvelous work entitled The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer chastised educators when he wrote, “We do not grant respect to students, to their
stumbling and failing. We do not grant respect to tentative and heartfelt ways of being in the world where the person can’t quite think of the right word or can’t think of any word at all. We don’t grant respect to silence and wonder.”

When students enter Messiah College, they are coming to a new home. They have experienced many other rooms in other homes before their arrival on our campus. As educators, we need to be sensitive to their belief systems and personal experiences and find concrete and tangible ways of affirming their self understandings even as we challenge them to thoughtfully consider new perspectives and ideas. Our goal is not to simply impose knowledge but to lovingly help our students discover their own potential to learn, to love, to create, and to give. The hospitable classroom is not a place of fear but a place of trust where students know that their positions and their questions will be treated with respect and consideration. The hospitable classroom necessitates that educators and students enter the room fully prepared and filled with anticipation for what might occur. (Tell the story of Munro and Heisey)

**Spiritual hospitality**

In addition to intellectual hospitality, we must also examine the role of spiritual hospitality on our campus and in our lives as believers. How do we engage others in conversation as we hold to the more exclusive claims of Christ? Brian
MacLaren’s new book entitled *A Generous Orthodoxy* challenges Christians to practice spiritual hospitality with each other and with people of other faiths, “because we follow Jesus… because we believe Jesus is true and because Jesus moves toward all people in love, kindness, and grace – we must do the same. Our identity must not make us afraid of, superior to, isolated from, defensive or aggressive toward or otherwise hostile to people of other religions.” In a world that has often witnessed gruesome horrors in the name of religion, Christians need to generously share hospitality as we demonstrate an alternate way to live together peacefully and to learn from others. (Example of Brooke and conversation about Muslims)

Once again, let me be very clear that I am not arguing for the compromise of deeply held beliefs or the forfeiture of Christian commitments. I am arguing for the practice of spiritual hospitality which allows people to share different human experiences as they discover some common points of understanding. Through the vehicle of authentic conversation, Christians can model what Jean Vanier described as “having a treasure of truth and peace to share.” Our task as a College community is to facilitate spaces in which those types of conversations are realized – in classes, residence halls, chapels, colloquies, and informal discussions in the Falcon or Larsen Student Union.
Creating those spaces is not an easy task. Learning to value each other’s perspectives is hard work. Communicating in ways that affirm people’s dignity requires humility and commitment. We need to reflect on our patterns of expression and determine if they transmit derogatory and oppressive concepts. We need to use language that is inclusive and positive. We need to include different voices and perspectives in our discussions. We need to engage in honest conversation that connects us at a deeper level – a level where we make ourselves vulnerable to each other. We need to expect that those conversations will be messy and time consuming. We need to embrace opportunities for conversations that challenge or concern us rather than affirm what we already believe to be true.

**Leadership**

What are the implications of hospitality for those of us who serve as leaders in the present and for those who will serve as leaders in the future? Czech author, leader and dissident Vaclav Havel claimed that “the power for authentic leadership is in the human heart.” I believe that Christians who are called to lead must personally embody hospitality as they seek to nurture organizational cultures that are characterized by hospitality. Effective leaders know that leadership is more about influence than power. Effective leaders know that leadership is more about people than products or policies. Effective leaders know that leadership is more about being willing to learn from mistakes than ignoring them. Robert Greenleaf, creator
of the servant leadership model wrote, “Revolutionary ideas do not change institutions. People change institutions. People change them by taking the risks to serve and lead, and by the sustained painstaking care that institution building requires.” That sustained, painstaking care will often require patience and courage but it always requires the practice of hospitality. As Interim President, I am learning daily lessons about the practice of Christian hospitality and how that practice can enable Messiah College to be the institution God calls her to be. I welcome your feedback about ways to nurture a hospitable campus culture at Messiah where students and employees are encouraged to flourish.

**Conclusion**

Now, back to my childhood and the lessons I learned from my family who first introduced me to the incredible riches of hospitality. As I have matured as a Christian, teacher, scholar, and family member, I have come to a much more robust understanding of the practice of hospitality, particularly the dimensions of intellectual and spiritual hospitality. I have come to understand that a significant aspect of the vocation of all Christians is to practice generous hospitality in all of the roles and contexts of our lives.

This morning I encourage all of us to follow the advice of author Frederick Buechner to look for daily opportunities to practice hospitality because “no event
is so commonplace but that God is always present within it.” I encourage all of us to experience the transforming power of hospitality so beautifully illustrated in the film clip from *Babette’s Feast*. As we reflect on the miracle of the incarnation as the ultimate expression of hospitality, our response must be to nurture intellectual and spiritual hospitality in our own individual lives and in the life of our beloved community.

Please pray with me:

Jesus,

Make our hearts ever gentler and more humble so that we may be present to those you have confided to our care, and in this way make us instruments of your love which gives life and joy and real freedom.

Amen.

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