

Easter 6C  
The Rev. Emily Richards  
May 9, 2010

### *The Practice of Hospitality*

Charmalie Jayasekera was one of my childhood friends. Her parents were well-educated Sri Lankans who had sought refuge for their family in America. The Jayasekera's home was the place to go for sleepovers. I always loved getting invited over to the Jays, as I fondly called them; but not for the reasons you might expect from a child. They didn't have the biggest house on the block. They didn't let us stay up all night or eat tons of junk food. It was more about how the family welcomed you and others into their home and into their lives.

From the moment you walked through the front door you were treated as a special guest. Every time I entered their house Mr. Jay would greet me as if I was a long lost relative. Mrs. Jay always had an abundance of food available and it was all homemade. The Jays never just had one guest visiting. They were always opening their home to their children's friends and to fellow Sri Lankans. During those sleepovers I met Sri Lankans who lived in Boston and LA and Cleveland. I remember thinking that every Sri Lankan who visited or

lived in the US must have passed through the Jayasekeras' home at some point along their journey. The Jays seemed happier the more guests they had visiting. Often, at their house, I'd fall asleep to the sounds of adults laughing and talking in the kitchen and then wake up in the morning to find a whole new group of folks eating breakfast.

As I reflect on those childhood experiences at the Jays, I can now see that as an immigrant family who was forced to leave their home, their community and country to become foreigners in a strange, new land, they understood profoundly the gift of hospitality. In America they had created a new home where no one would be treated as strangers, but all embraced as friends and family. Their home was a sanctuary for other Sri Lankans struggling to make their way in this foreign land. And whether they knew it or not, for years their home was also a place of joy and laughter and safety for many American children.

We continue, in this Eastertide, to hear about the ministries of those first Christians and the formation of the early Church in Luke's account of the Acts of the Apostles. Reading today's passage from Acts brought back memories of those sleepovers at the Jays' home and the gift of hospitality which they freely gave to so many.

In the Acts narrative we learn about the conversion of Lydia, a successful and wealthy businesswoman who traded in the finest of cloth and who ran her own household. The conversion took place in Philippi, modern day Greece, and so Lydia is considered the first European convert. Lydia, it seems, became the leader of the first congregation in Philippi. Her home was the place where the community gathered and her resources were used to support its ministry. What grabbed my attention in this story was that immediately after Lydia and her household were baptized, she invited Paul and the others into her home to stay with her.

It was at her initiative and at her insistence that she welcomed them into her home. The words Luke used were strong ones. He said, “She prevailed upon us.” She would not take no for an answer. Lydia opened her heart, listened to Paul’s preaching of the good news, was baptized and then immediately engaged in the practice of hospitality. Embracing this new life in Christ, Lydia then offers the same gracious welcome to those in her midst as she had received in the waters of baptism.

A hallmark of the early Church was the practice of hospitality. As these small, struggling communities were trying to understand what

it meant to be followers of the crucified and risen Christ, the home became the center of their life together. The home was a place where early Christians gathered in fellowship and worship, where they told stories of Jesus, participated in the Eucharist and where stranger and friend alike were welcomed and invited to share in the resurrection life. It was a place where old and young, rich and poor, the outcast and sinner, the brokenhearted and joyful, could sit down together at table and could feast on God's abundance.

It was a place where they could freely proclaim their Easter Alleluias. Relying on the kindness and generosity of one another in order to survive and eventually grow, hospitality became an essential component in fostering the community of faith. In her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl writes, Hospitality "requires an openness of heart, a willingness to make one's life visible to others, and a generosity of time and resources." Lydia, a successful businesswoman, embodied this very openness and generosity and so became the first leader of the Church in Europe. My Sri Lankan friends, the Jayasekeras, were some of the first in my, young life to embody it as well by making their home a place of belonging for all who crossed its threshold. And so it must be with us.

Ironically, living in a global, technologically advanced society where we can connect with one other 24/7, we still long for a deeper sense of connectedness and community. We find ourselves lost in a fragmented, mobile and self-absorbed world that often leads to isolation and estrangement. We need places where we know that we belong, places like the Jayasekeras home where we are welcomed with open arms and open hearts, and met not as strangers, but as sisters and brothers. Our own homes, communities, and church must become such places where the gift of God's grace and generosity is encountered through our practice of hospitality.

Friends, in our baptisms we were welcomed into the household of God. Every day of our lives should be about offering that same welcome to those around us, gathering as priest and people around God's table, sharing the incredible stories of our lives with one another and being blessed by the presence of the risen Christ who dwells among us when we open our hearts to both friend and stranger. This new life in Christ is not to be lived in isolation, but to be shared with one another. Our Easter joy can only be experienced when we open wide the doors of our homes and our church and welcome others to the feast.

