

Pastor's Piece: Attentive hospitality

The season of Epiphany is associated with light. Our Epiphany hymns are filled with the poetry of starlight. At season's end, Epiphany gives way to the white light of Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent. The light of Christ is light to all people.

This year, my family and I spent the Day of Epiphany in Oslo, Norway, at a latitude where daylight was in short supply. But the days leading into Epiphany are the days that burned most brightly for me. They were spent in the shadow of mountains in a farmhouse well north of Oslo. That farmhouse conveyed warmth and light throughout the week of our stay. The cast-iron stove in the living room was dependably supplied with logs; the Christmas tree lights remained on; the pine floor and ceiling glowed with amber reflections. But the profounder impression of light was gained from our host, my second cousin, with his unflagging spirit of hospitality. Gunnar is a soft-spoken, resolute man, whose modesty accommodates a keen aesthetic. He fed us well, with dinners of lamb and cabbage, and rockfish, and with breakfasts of flatbread, brown and white cheeses, herring, and liver pâté. He drove us all about the vicinity, introduced us to a slew of my relatives, walked us to ancestral landmarks, shared a trove of genealogical records, and initiated us into the culture of the region. If I had to describe his hospitality in a single word it would be "attentive." He was attentive to us without calling attention to himself.

My cousin normally limits himself to four small demitasse cups of coffee in the morning, but upon noticing our family's Yankee pattern of consumption, he brewed three pots in succession and kept filling our cups like an attentive waiter! When the boys and I became embroiled in animated conversations among ourselves, he quietly occupied himself until an opening presented itself. Then, he sat down with a book or sheaf of papers and shifted our focus onto family history.

Gunnar and I share the same great-grandfather, who was my mother's paternal grandfather. But he took the time to investigate my mother's maternal side, too. On an especially memorable day, he drove us to a steep slope of the local fjord and led us up to some foundation stones and brush that marked the birthplace of my maternal great-grandfather. He explained this had been a family of "crofters," sharecroppers whose mountainside existence was likely eased by the southern exposure. Nevertheless, my great-grandfather and all his siblings immigrated to America, and my great-grandfather became a landholding farmer in southwestern Minnesota. We also visited the old church where my great-grandfather was baptized. These experiences left me feeling grounded in a way I'd not felt before.

Church leaders, authors, seminary students and young pastors have been engaged with the theme of "radical hospitality" for the past few years. Conversation has focused on open Communion and the welcome of otherwise marginalized persons. As we think about hospitality, it may be helpful to remember the importance of attentiveness. Hospitality may include grand gestures but must include small ones practiced at close range. Attentiveness to a visitor demands the tabling of one's own agenda and an attention to detail evidenced in something so small as a liberal pouring of coffee at the table.

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