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Osler Mennonite Church

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For me, hospitality is the place where food and faith meet.

Hebrews 13:1-2 says “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Romans 12:13 says (in the context of loving one another) “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.” There are many Old and New Testament stories about hospitality. The Woman of Shunem offered food and lodging to Elisha long before her son got sick and needed healing. Jewish festivals and holidays were loaded with good food and good company. Jesus gladly received hospitality from Mary and Martha, Zacchaeus, Simon the tax collector, the Samaritan woman to name a few.

Jesus had no place to call home. (The foxes have holes, birds have nests, but I have no place to lay my head.) Still he offered hospitality when a little boy offered five loaves and two fish so that more than 5,000 people could have lunch, to his disciples – at the Passover supper, at an early morning breakfast on the beach after his resurrection, to children. He offers it still to anyone who responds to his call, “Come to me, and I will give you rest.”

Anything I know about hospitality is from being on the receiving end of it. This morning I want to talk about several women whom I’ve observed offering hospitality in ways that expressed their faith and their way of being in the world.

My mother’s mom (Susie Pauls) came to Canada as a 13 year old refugee from Russia. Nestor Machnov, the leader of a ruthless group of bandits, was a familiar name around her dinner or coffee table. Her family, once well off, came to the Herbert area with debt and traumatic memories. She lived as a widow for nearly 25 years - We lived two doors from her for much of that time. She was a great cook and made terrific soups, vareniki and apple pie. I have one especially lovely memory of her hospitality very soon after we had moved into that house. It was Saturday afternoon and our children were gone. They had been playing outside in our unfenced yard with a busy road in the front. We were very worried. Of course we

eventually found them at grandma's house, eating pie and ice cream. Grandma said, "Don't worry so much – just let the children come!" She knew she was entertaining angels.

My father's mom (Lydia Hiebert) came to Canada from Kansas. Her birth family was well established by the time she married my grandfather, a widower with two children and insurmountable debt from his first wife's medical bills before the days of Medicare. They were desperately poor for years. She learned to 'make do.' I was born in BC and until I was 5, my family lived a couple of miles from my grandparents' farm on Downes Road near Clearbrook. Sunday dinners were at grandma's house – I have memories of chicken and bubbat, cousins and happy times under the trees. When we moved to Saskatchewan, she would ride the greyhound to visit. Between visits she practiced hospitality, too. Once in awhile a corn flakes box filled with cookies would arrive in the mail – jam jams for the children and date cookies for her son. A few years ago 6 of her remaining 7 (there were originally 11) were at our house celebrating my dad's 80th birthday at dinner with a few cousins, nieces and nephews. They noticed that the cold ham, potato salad, pickles, zwiebach and meatballs represented their mom and talked about how that made them feel like they were home. Their life as little ones wasn't always pleasant (they discovered first hand that poverty is not kind). There were laughter and tears as they celebrated their love for one another. Every dinner for this group is a joyful event filled with memories flavoured by mercy, forgiveness, love and grace.

My mother learned from these women, her mothers. She loved having company. I'm not sure how much she loved cooking, but she did it joyfully because she loved people and loved 'having them over.' Our family lived in the same community as my parents. We received their gift of hospitality gratefully and gladly, among other times, every Sunday at noon. Mom clicked her tongue if the meat was overcooked and giggled when the children liked her new dessert. Food at her table was plentiful – she loved trying new recipes. Often last minute invitations were made to visiting speakers or singers. Her mother had a weekly place reserved at the table, too. After lunch there were often games - cribbage, hearts, Rakko. Our children formed deep relationship with their grandparents over these visits. There was seldom a dull moment when Elvira was in the house. Our family wasn't different from any other in

that storms blew up from time to time, making us feel worried and scared. We thought she walked on water, helping us feel safe at home no matter what.

Now we live in George's family home. I sometimes think it should be called "Gert's Place" since it has been home to three generations of Gertrude. My mother-in-law wasn't nearly as adventurous a cook as the women on my side of the family. Her recipes all fit into her head. She taught her family to make soup, buns and traditional Mennonite dishes. I stand amazed at the way she cooked for her large growing family of children and grandchildren, always making the right amount for everyone. According to her she couldn't make a decent pie to save her life, though the last one she took to dad in the Rosthern hospital when she was 98, turned out pretty good! She was admitted to hospital the next day and died two weeks later –her life's work complete with that perfect pie. Mom often struggled with worry and anxiety. She found her best self in cooking food that was always seasoned with calmness, patience, and grace.

A couple of years ago we found ourselves on a bus with several members of our daughter-in-law, Yanpei's family. None of them could speak English while our Chinese was limited to 'hello, thank you and where's the bathroom'. Our hosts worried that this trip to Yanpei's grandma (Nainai)'s house was unsuitable for dainty Canadians - it was pouring rain! Nainai, though, thought that we should go and we did. The bus stopped when the narrow concrete road ended, and 81 year old Nainai was first out the door. She took off her shoes and headed barefoot down the muddy road – without saying a word she was telling us, "Come! Follow me!" We all followed obediently, past a stuck motorbike, past the terraced fields of canola, wheat, corn and rice. Nainai's neighbours noticed a large group trudging toward their village in the rain. They met us with umbrellas and hats for everyone, waving us on. "Zola! (let's go!) Come! Look around! (Nainai's home is humble according to our standards). Here, have some tea. Come, sit down and rest."

These women follow me around my kitchen sometimes. Not literally, of course, since four of them are practicing hospitality in heaven and one lives on the other side of the world. All of them have shown the kind of hospitality Jesus offers when he says, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."