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Text: 1 Kings 19:4-8, John 6:35, 41-51

Havens of Hospitality

Scooba is quiet country town in Mississippi near the Alabama border. The lifeblood of this small town of only 700 residents is the main campus of East Mississippi Community College. In Scooba, football is serious business. The school is a junior college powerhouse that has won multiple national championships over the last decade. It has a head coach that prizes winning above all else, and his stated goal for each game is to "beat the other team to sleep." Another reason for EMCC's success is its willingness to give a shot to exceptional athletes who have made mistakes off the field. Some of the most talented were kicked off high-powered Division 1 programs; others failed to meet the academic requirements. Recently, I watched a documentary series called "Last Chance U" that chronicled the EMCC football team and its players.

The show has little to do with the actual game of football. It is really about how an institution prepares a group of young men who are only eighteen and nineteen years to navigate the pressure cooker of collegiate football. It shows the head coach out front swearing like a sailor and driving to win at all cost. To my surprise, it also reveals that the dedicated support staff truly drives team's success as they create an environment where these young men can thrive on and off the field.

No one on the show does this better than the guidance counselor, Brittany Wagner. Decorated with bright colors and countless photos of her with former players, Ms. Wagner's office is an emotional safe space for the players. She takes the time to get to know them, and her office is place where they can share their hopes, fears, and anxieties. She knows that few if any of these young men will ever make a living playing football. Instead of simply trying to push them through the system, she strives to unleash their academic potential. To the student without supplies, she offers plenty of pencils and notebooks. To the borderline student who is disrespectful, she shares the reality that teachers are much more likely to fail students they dislike. For the student who lacks confidence, she has the gift of lifting up whatever intellectual strengths in them she can find. She cares deeply about helping these often broken young men, creating a haven of hospitality in the sea of hostility that is collegiate football.

In today's Old Testament reading, Elijah also wilts under the weight of high expectations. Being on the lam has exhausted the once mighty prophet who raised a young man from the dead and upstaged King Ahab's holy men to highlight God's power on Mount Carmel. Having left behind his travel companion, he feels as lonely as the single broom tree in the desert he lies beneath. Because the queen wants him dead, the world is a dangerous and hostile place for him. Elijah has no need for pretentious manners, he needs space in his soul for the love of God to feed and transform him. He needs some real hospitality.

A few months ago, I asked Karla in the library if she could gather a list of works that dealt with hospitality. One of the titles she uncovered for me was the Henri Nouwen classic, *Reaching Out*.

Although the book was published nearly forty years ago, his assertion that most of us are fundamentally disconnected from the world around us rings true. He writes, "Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm." In Nouwen's opinion, the call of the Christian is to create spaces that can allow strangers to become guests. It is a shift "from hostility to hospitality."

With all of the hostility that has surrounded Elijah, he feels as if he is a total stranger in the world. He enters Beersheba, the southernmost city of Judah—a land technically outside of Ahab and Jezebel's jurisdiction in the north—and still he does not feel welcome. He can find no place in the world to escape Jezebel's cruelty, no person who will stand with him in this struggle. Elijah cries, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." While the text reads that he lied down to sleep, he has in essence given up on living.

Mercifully, an angel awakes him from his sleep, saying, "Get up and eat." The angel offers him a jar of water and hot cakes but more importantly encouragement. When Elijah goes back to sleep, the angel does not give up on him. The angel insists, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." The angel's offering of gifts allows Elijah to reconnect with his own gifts and purpose. The hospitality makes space for God to renew Elijah, and he continues through the desert for another forty days and nights.

Although hospitality opens up space for God, it does not necessarily fix people according to our expectations. Elijah breaks down again in his famous scene in the cave a few verses later. Over time, the hospitality eventually grants Elijah the resolve to identify a successor and confront the powerful again. Nevertheless, his works and words never match what they once were.

While Elijah does receive God's gifts, our reading from John reinforces that this is not always the case. Here the surrounding community does not accept Jesus' hospitality, whose mere presence is the "bread of life." This reflects the early Christian community from which John's gospel sprung. It struggled to make sense of why some of their fellow Jews not only failed to accept Jesus as the "bread of life" but also decided to persecute them for their divergent path. It is hard to accept that others will not always receive the hospitality we have to offer.

This truth makes for some of the most painful scenes in "Last Chance U." Even the hospitality of the saintly Ms. Wagner is not enough to reform some of the students. Some of them simply cannot stay within the boundaries of the program, regardless of how talented they might be. For many of them, football was the one thing in their life that was right. When the competitiveness of the program undermines their perception of themselves as star athletes, it also stirs up the brokenness within them from unresolved conflicts, hard upbringings, and the angst of early adulthood. Because of the brokenness that dwells within them, many leave Scooba failing to take advantage of their talents on the field or in the classroom.

There are few things more difficult than offering hospitality to those who need it most and are loathe to accept it. You can do your research to understand where they are coming from. You can learn the best practices of hospitality. You can examine yourself to determine how you

might be exacerbating the problem. None of that hard work can guarantee that you will be able to help someone out of their wilderness. Even angels have their limitations.

Although we love language that empowers us to be God's hands and feet in the world, some things are beyond our reach. When the angel awakens Elijah and puts out food and water to nourish him for the journey ahead, Elijah's flourishing still requires a stirring within Elijah's spirit to continue. This does not let us off the hook for our indifference or complicity in systems that grind away at the most vulnerable people's will to live and thrive. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Our call to hospitality demands that we do everything we can to create a space for strangers to become guests, to share and cultivate one another's gifts.

In the face of obstacles, our strength to continue is rooted in God's hospitality. In the presence of Christ, God sends us the living bread and water we need to turn deserts into havens of hospitality. As we know from the cross and empty tomb, God does not abandon us when we fail to do so. We put our faith in God to make whole what we have failed to piece back together. In the meantime, we work to become people of hospitality, quick to share the living bread and water God has so graciously given us.

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