

An Empty Bowl

KAYLENE DERKSEN¹

Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God’s words; if help, let it be God’s hearty help.

- I Peter 4:7–10, *The Message*

These verses are pretty standard Anabaptist stuff. The world won’t last, so keep praying. Love and serve others (especially food) as if your life depends on it, because it’s God’s way of building God’s kingdom. This is hospitality 101. It’s what I cut my teeth on. My parents made it look easy and even exciting.

Growing up in my family of ten, you would have thought there were enough mouths to feed, bodies to clothe, stories to listen to, and people to love. But apparently it wasn’t so. Though my family was not wealthy by anyone’s imagination, we always seemed to have extra—mostly extra food and space at our table. This is where learning hospitality began for me. And this is where I began to see that hospitality is hard.

My quintessentially hardworking Mennonite farmer parents were lovers of God and lovers of people, and in that order. They believed that God had called them to love those around them. Their neighbor could be anyone, and hospitality was to be shown to all.

Our farm was set along a country road and butted up against a small forest. It was just a dairy farm of no great consequence, with about a hundred head of cattle, fifty chickens (depending on the time of year), a dog or two, and some feral cats. We had pigs, but they were not regular guests. The odd sheep, ducks, and even a horse graced the farmyard when I was a youngster.

We were pretty much like our neighbors, though Mennonite and surround-

¹ *Kaylene Derksen is the Development Director at Eastern Mennonite Missions. She has been learning to live missionally all of her adult life in Europe, Central America, and in the United States. She and her husband have one young adult daughter and enjoy living in a row house near the train station in Lancaster, PA.*

ed by Catholics. We and our neighbors had the same kinds of animals, same plantings of crops, same kind of manure, same weather, and the same smells. But there was one noticeable difference in our house. People would stop in. They would drop by unannounced. They came in cars, on bikes, and even on foot. And it never seemed to matter what was going on when they arrived, because my dear parents would roll out their version of the red carpet.

I often heard Dad say, “Mother, let’s set another place at the table,” or, “Didn’t you just bake bread this morning? I’m sure there’s an extra loaf.” Mom never just cooked for the ten people she loved the most. She always planned ahead for more. “Why would you make *just* enough?” This is red carpet talk.

If anyone came by on a Saturday, they could expect pancakes and eggs for breakfast, thick and hearty potato soup for dinner (what others might know of as *lunch*), and homemade deep-dish pizza for supper. We were rural people—there were no light meals in our home. Proper stomach-filling dinners were never questioned, and the calories were easily metabolized in time for a sure-to-be-hearty supper. Afternoons were often interrupted with cookies, glasses of milk, or coffee. But rolling out that red carpet takes lots of time and is mostly inconvenient. Farms are busy places, especially with that many children!

Though Mom and Dad were both raised in fairly conservative traditions, they never let their backgrounds keep them from friendships beyond their borders. I remember the particular warmth shown to a couple that visited fairly often on weeknights. Though the house was always crazy with children and the day’s work had all but exhausted my parents, a quick salad dressing cake would miraculously appear, still warm in its pan. Fresh coffee was brewed, cream and sugar came out, and alongside it all, an empty bowl.

This empty bowl was a sign of welcome on the part of my father, and compromise on the part of my mother. John and Frankie came to our home because they knew that they would be welcomed and that the little empty bowl would be waiting for them.

As soon as their car was heard pulling into the driveway, Dad would go out to meet John and Frankie in his line-dried clean jeans and a t-shirt worn butter-soft with use. They only lived three miles away, but they were greeted as if they’d traveled the entire day.

John was a lanky Elvis-type guy with tight jeans, pointy black boots, and a pompadour, while his wife wore stylish open-toed platform heels. I could see her red toenails and tanned feet. Frankie was bottle-blond, tanned, lipsticked, and had the best posture I’d ever seen. This pair could not have been more different from my parents if they had tried.

“Come in, come in.” “Oh, Rhoda, you shouldn’t have!” And off to the din-

ing table they went. I always watched from the sidelines, partly because I was in awe of the ease my parents had with these flashy people who talked a lot and looked so glamorous, and partly because I wanted cake.

They began to talk and laugh. John, teasing my Mom that cake is the only reason he came to visit; Frankie, defending my mom and asking Dad for house-building tips. Such fun they were.

I never observed any discomfort on anyone's part. Even when the visitors were lingering in a chocolate cake coma over their coffee and their cigarettes came out. The conversation went on as our house filled with second-hand smoke and the little bowl filled with butts. They knew this was not my parents' style, but they were welcomed, nevertheless. No wonder they came.

Every time after they left, there was much cleaning to be done. Smoke removal is not easy. Mom fussed over the smell. Dad looked helpless. Hospitality is hard.

That small farm tucked along a forest's edge is no longer my home, and I no longer live in the country. None of my trappings are similar to the simplicity of the pasture full of Holsteins, a backyard full of tall pine trees, or a night sky unmarred by too much electric light.

I live in a city now, and I've been a city dweller for most of my adult life. However, even in my world of higher convenience and less space, I do have the ability to cook, and I have embraced the importance of the table. Mom and Dad instilled in me their love of God and their love of people, and I am learning the courage it takes to be truly hospitable. I believe that God has asked me to be available to love whomever is placed in my path. I am learning the surrender that such love entails.

This love and level of hospitality that my parents modeled involves hosting guests who have no respect for my personal space and no concept of their own. It involves the smell of body odor, cigarette smoke, and shoes removed too late in the day. Sometimes it means having a visitor at my table who refuses anything green or healthy, unintentionally insulting me and my endeavors to prepare and serve whole foods. Sometimes this hospitality leaves me exhausted from the late nights, many questions, and hours of listening. And sometimes it means I try too hard.

When I get to the point of being entirely poured out, I read further in 1 Pet 4:12, "When life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner."

Daily, I put out my own empty bowl on my dining table, as a sign of wel-

come and of compromise. As a sign of the difficulty and also the joy I experience on this journey toward hospitality, on this journey of learning to love those around me.