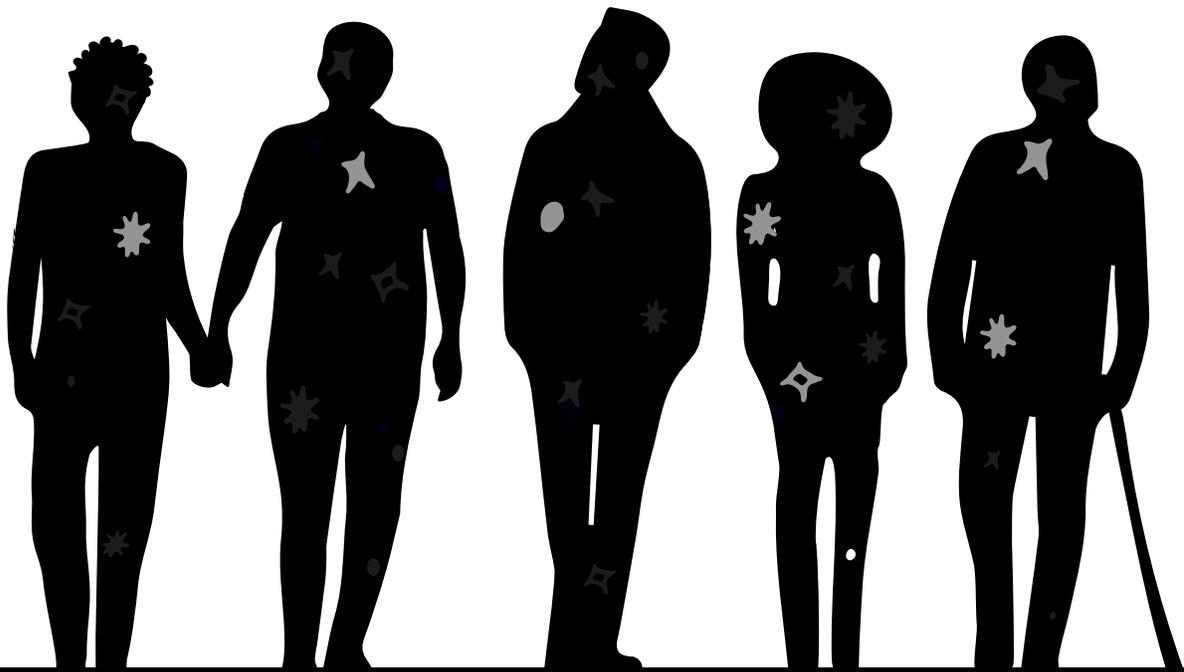


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 3:
Radical Hospitality

with Dr. Peter Gathje



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Peter Gathje: We need to shorten the distance between us and the people who are suffering. And that's about relationship. That's about going to what a friend of mine calls the listening posts, go to the jails, go to the courtrooms, go to the streets and listen, and look and learn from the people who are vulnerable and the people who are suffering under the current systems. And they will tell their stories. And as you listen to their stories, you'll learn how the system is structured against them.

Donny Bryant: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship. And we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts.

Donny Bryant: I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes. And this is The Cosmic We. Today we welcome Dr. Peter Gathje, my friend and former teaching colleague. I met Dr. Gathje when he was a professor in the religion and philosophy department at Christian Brothers University. He currently serves as vice president of academic affairs, dean at Memphis Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tennessee. This seminary is one of the most vibrant acumenical seminaries in the country. And I say that because it offers topnotch scholarship and piety along with justice and attention to diversity. Along with being the academic leader at MTS, he's a founder of Manna House, a place of sanctuary and respite where guests, some of whom are homeless, are able to relax, engage in conversation, take showers and receive resources to sustain them like community and clothing.

Barbara Holmes: Just to give you a snapshot of Pete's background, he was raised in Rochester, Minnesota, went to Catholic schools where he was taught by Franciscan nuns and Benedictine monks. While a graduate student at Emory, Pete connected to the Open Door Community in Atlanta. It is now in Baltimore. The Open Door at the time was run by Reverend Ed Loring and the late Murphy Davis. It was a Presbyterian Catholic worker community living and working with people on the streets, in prisons and working for help for folks on death row. His writing includes a co-edited piece, *Doing Right and Being Good: Catholic and Protestant Readings in Christian Ethics* as well as two books about the Open Door Community. Welcome, Pete. It's good to have you here. Is there anything else you'd like the audience to know about you and your ministry?

Peter Gathje: Well, I think you summed it up pretty well, Barbara. Thank you for that generous introduction. And it's good to be with you all today.

Barbara Holmes: You've talked about the idea of radical hospitality. Can you give the listeners a sense of what that means? Because the word radical sometimes freaks people out.

Peter Gathje: Well, it's okay for people to be freaked out once in a while.

Barbara Holmes: I agree.

- Peter Gathje: But for me radical is important as a word because it means going to the roots. And what we're trying to do with radical hospitality is to go to the roots of hospitality in the Christian tradition, certainly, but it's in all of the traditions or in all the religions of the world really, there's practice of hospitality. So radical hospitality is going to the roots of hospitality and within the Christian tradition at least those roots are that we meet the living God as we welcome strangers in our midst. And that's really simply what we're doing.
- Barbara Holmes: Well, why do you call it Manna House for those who are not reading their Bibles every few minutes?
- Peter Gathje: Well, Manna House is derived from the Exodus story in the Hebrew scriptures. After the Israelites are freed from slavery by the mighty acts of God, they have a period in which they're in the desert for 40 years. Some people talk about this as they got out of slavery in Egypt, but they had to get the slavery out of themselves as well. So the desert experience as a freeing experience. Well, freedom is hard. It's hard to live into freedom. And one of the ways in which they had to live into freedom was to let go of the diet that they had gotten used to as slaves. And so as they're out in the desert, they get hungry because they haven't switched diets yet.
- Peter Gathje: And God says to them, "I will feed you chicken sandwiches," or something close to chicken sandwiches, quail and manna, which people often think of as bread, but the actual Hebrew word manna means what is it? So each morning they could collect as much manna as they needed, but they were not to store it. It's God's economy in which there's more than enough if we share. So they could store for Sabbath, but not for anything else. So for us, we wanted to be Manna House where people are sharing with us so that we can share with others. And we try to make sure that things go out as quickly as they come in. So there's no hoarding. There's more than enough for everybody if we share, which is a basic principle of God's economy.
- Barbara Holmes: That'll preach, Pete, for those who have more than one storage bin in a house chuck full of things.
- Peter Gathje: Yes.
- Barbara Holmes: Enough for the day, we'll preach.
- Peter Gathje: Absolutely. And that's what we're trying to do, is enough for the day as people come to us. So what we're doing is making sure that people have what they need while they're with us.
- Donny Bryant: It's interesting when in one of your works you talk about how this is not as much as the workers sharing the gospel or evangelizing. Typically, Christians have this idea that we're doing missionary work. We're doing ministry as representatives of God, to do God's work, right? So there's this performative base aspect to it. But in one of your pieces you were asked the question or the question asked, "Do you evangelize the people you are serving?" And I just would like for you to address that and to help us understand really how that makes sense in the work that you do at the Manna House.

Peter Gathje: Great question. Yeah. We are not in the business of evangelizing in the traditional sense of trying to save people, rather we're grounded in Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus talks... It's a parable, the last judgment. And He's talking about what are the criteria by which we are judged and it boils down to whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me. So there's a message in that parable where Jesus is identifying His very presence with the people who are being served. So those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those who are in need of clothing, those who are imprisoned or sick. So when we are welcoming our guests to Manna House, we are welcoming the very presence of Christ. So we're the ones who are being evangelized by our guests. We are the ones who need to learn the gospel from them and they are great teachers.

Peter Gathje: I actually had an interesting conversation sort of go in the other direction. We were talking, myself with some other guests there, about this whole notion of being evangelized when they go to places that are offering them services. And one of the men said to me, "They're always trying to get me baptized. Well, I've been baptized eight times." "Okay. So you're more baptized than me. I've only been baptized once." But almost all of our guests who come... I mean, we're in Memphis, we're in the south. They've been to church. They know church quite well, and they don't need to be taught the gospel. They know the gospel.

Peter Gathje: What they don't realize sometimes is they are great teachers of the gospel themselves. And part of that teaching that they do is that they invite us into the lives of people who are on the streets, into their lives, and they reveal to us what's really going on in our society underneath all the hype. And I am old school so I really go with public enemy and I say, don't believe the hype, right? You got to go beneath the hype, because that's where the truth is.

Barbara Holmes: I mean, you say that your guests at Manna House, those who are homeless, those who may not be, are living the best that they can under poverty and the violence of our economic and political and cultural systems. Now, I'm not sure during this present age with the bizarre manifestations of certain kinds of patriotism that the majority of the people in this country recognize the violence of our economic, political and cultural systems. So we don't really see our effects on us or anyone else. What needs to change to wake us up?

Peter Gathje: Well, we need to shorten the distance between us and the people who are suffering. And that's about relationship. That's about going to what a friend of mine calls the listening posts, go to the jails, go to the courtrooms, go to the streets and listen, and look and learn from the people who are vulnerable and the people who are suffering under the current systems. And they will tell their stories. And as you listen to their stories, you'll learn how the system is structured against them from things as simple as the lack of public transportation that's reliable so that they can get from where they might be living to where they need to work. In Memphis, for example, our public transportation is horrendously bad. People spend two to three hours each day just trying to get from where they live to where they work because the bus system's not set up, it's not extensive enough that it actually can serve people

who rely upon it. And that's just one small example.

Donny Bryant: I really agree with you that when you shorten the distance between and take away this idea of classism and socioeconomic status, when you just see the humanity in individuals, that's that cosmic connection. You see that person as an image bear, a child of God if you will, no longer a person who is homeless or a person who is down on their luck. You begin to see the commonalities in that. And so I totally agree that participating in this type of missionary work really allows you to eliminate those gaps that sometimes our society does have so strongly.

Peter Gathje: Yeah, it does. And at the same time, I mean, I walk away from Manna House and I go home. And so I'm not experiencing the suffering that our guests are experiencing. Even for me trying to lessen the gap, a gap remains and I need to be attentive to that. And it's why I need to keep going back to Manna House, sort of why I have to keep going back to church because I'm so hardhearted and thickheaded that I don't get the message in just one visit. One of our guests, I'll call him Moses. He's been on the streets for quite a while and he knows the word of God inside and out. I mean, he sits at the table in our backyard and reads the Bible every day that he's there.

Peter Gathje: And so all I do is I go up to him and I say, "Hey, Moses, give me the word for today," and he'll share whatever it is that he's reading. And then we'll sit down and do Bible study together and then other guests will join in. But I'm not doing that Bible study because I'm trying to get Moses to understand the Bible. I'm doing that Bible study because I know I can only really understand the Bible through people who are really fully relying upon God, people who are on the streets and people who are therefore reading the text through the eyes of the kinds of people who were writing those texts in the first place.

Peter Gathje: I think it's important to keep in mind that the New Testament and certainly large sections of the Hebrew scriptures, so-called Old Testament are written by the people who were on the margins or at least people who are identifying the people on the margins. And so I can't understand the Bible unless I'm reading it with people who are closer to those who wrote the Bible in the first place. I mean, for example, it was revealed to me one day when Moses said to me... We were reading some stuff in the Exodus, he says, "Too many people identify with the Israelites." I said, "What do you mean, Moses?" He said, "Well, like you for example, you're more like Pharaoh."

Peter Gathje: And I said, "Say a little more." He said, "Well, you're in charge here, right? That's Pharaoh. The Israelites weren't in charge." So that perspective is like, oh my God, yeah, I've always read that Bible story as if I'm with the Israelites, right? I'm with the good guys, and yet the reality is my social location, I'm a lot closer to the Egyptians and the Pharaoh than to the Israelites. That was revelatory to me and really helpful.

Donny Bryant: Well, you speak to this brilliance that Moses brings to humanity, but there's

often a negative stigma that is associated with homelessness. There's often a particular perspective that our culture and our society has around homelessness. Could you help our guests better understand how to eliminate that stigma? How can that stigma be erased based on your experience and some of your stories and narratives that you have?

Peter Gathje: There's a friend of mine, Brad Watkins, used to run the Mid-South Peace & Justice Center here in Memphis. And he said the first thing to realize about people who are on the streets is that they're not from the planet homelessness, right? They're human beings just like you and me. So there is that baseline of a shared humanity. At the same time, what I need to do is to recognize that they've had different experiences than I have had. Almost everybody who's on the streets grew up in poverty. When people say things like there but for the grace of God go I, first of all, I hate that phrase, but second of all, it's just not true. There are very few people you'll ever meet on the streets who started out middle class or upper middle class, or even further up.

Peter Gathje: Almost everybody on the streets started in poverty. They had a very tenuous safety net around them and then something blew a hole through that safety net. It's often a death. Sometimes it's mental illness. Sometimes it's some other form of abandonment that they get cut off from their community and that's how they end up in homelessness. And the difficulty of getting out of homelessness is the reconstruction of some kind of community around people so that they have that support, that emotional, psychological, spiritual, and financial support to remain in housing. And of course you can only remain in housing if you get into housing in the first place.

Peter Gathje: And I get asked often like, "Well, what causes homelessness?" It's pretty simple what causes homelessness, is you don't have a home. And what causes that is that it's not affordable. That we treat housing in this country as a commodity to be bought and sold rather than as a human right that's absolutely essential to our flourishing as human beings. And that's what we do with everything in this capitalist society, is we reduce everything to a commodity, including something as basic as housing, but certainly healthcare as well, education. I mean, it all gets exchanged on the marketplace rather than being seen as goods that we're developing together and that therefore should be shared in ways that are just.

Barbara Holmes: You say that when you are speaking about homelessness in public venues, you often get asked what to do when approached by panhandlers. Can you give us a brief synopsis? You wrote an article, 10 Rules for Addressing Panhandlers. You don't have to give us all 10 unless you want to, but just give us an idea because that lurks in the back of folks minds, because that seems to be their primary direct contact with folks who are living on the streets.

Peter Gathje: Yeah. I can't give all 10 because I don't remember them, but I do remember number one, which is treat people with respect. And I learned this from somebody at Manna House. I said, "What's it feel like when people say no to you when you're panhandling?" He said, "Ah, it doesn't bother me. I feel like I'm making cold calls. So if somebody says, yes, that's great. If they say no, that's fine too." And I said, "Well, what does bother?" He said, "When they disrespect me. When they treat me like I'm not even a human being." I said so the first rule of working with somebody who is

panhandling is to say, "Hello, how you doing? Maybe I can't help you today maybe, but I'm still recognizing your humanity." And for most panhandlers that's going to be perfectly fine.

Peter Gathje: And part of what some people say, "Well, I don't want to deal with panhandlers because they're aggressive." Well, we usually have different views of what aggressiveness is depending on our own experiences, but I've known some panhandlers who are aggressive in the sense of they're making me uncomfortable by their physical stance towards me. And what I'll say to that person is, "Look, I just can't help you today and I'm sorry, but I'm going to keep moving." And on the other hand, I keep a few bucks in my pocket that I regard as my street tax money. And if somebody asks me for money and I still have my street tax money, I can give them a buck or a couple bucks. But when I'm out, I carry \$5 or \$10 for street tax and the next person asks me for some money, I'll say, "Look, I'm tapped out. I've already given my street tax today. So maybe I can hit you up next time."

Peter Gathje: The other thing I also like to do is... And I can't remember if this is in the rules or not, but it's a manna thing to do. Somebody asks you for some change or \$1 or something like that, give them \$5 or \$10. Give more than you're asked for and that will lead to a pleasant exchange. That will lead to wow. Sometimes people try not to take that much and that's fine too. But really what I try to avoid is making this whole thing about panhandling as to I'm the ATM and the other person is just getting cash out of me. So what I want to do is somehow connect or try to make some kind of connection that's humanizing between us so that the person on the streets whose panhandling can see me as a human being and not just as a dispenser of cash and I can see them as a human being and not just somebody who's asking me for money

Barbara Holmes: Until I volunteered at Manna house years ago, I viewed, like a lot of people do, the label homeless as all inclusive. And it took me a minute to understand the LGBTQ homeless folks experience even more discrimination than those who don't identify because of their sexuality. I think the listeners, a lot of them may not be aware of that. Can you tell us about how that works?

Peter Gathje: Yeah. Homophobia and that hatred of the different is not isolated to people who are off the streets. So people around the streets, they're not from the planet homelessness. They have picked up all the cultural cues that the rest of us are affected and infected with. Among the homeless communities sometimes there's anti-gay, anti-lesbian, anti-transgender emotions that are being expressed. And sometimes that's done violently, physical violence. Sometimes that's done more typically emotional violence through what's said, the words that are used. We decided at Manna House from the very beginning that we are going to be a place where all people will feel welcomed irregardless of sexuality. And that's made a huge difference for how our other guests have learned I think that we have that commitment.

Peter Gathje: And so though, at least within the confines of Manna House, practice that commitment as well. But I have to say, I grew up in a Catholic church and I picked up a lot of the anti-homosexual stuff, not just there, but in other places. And one of the things I learned at Manna House was... I was on the front porch one day and one of

the guests asked me if I would pray for her, and this was a person who was identifying as woman. And I said, "Sure, I'd be happy to pray for you, even though I'm not very good at it." And the person said, "Well, let me just say what I'm praying for." And I said, "Okay, go ahead and tell me what I should pray for with you." She said, "I'm trying to find a church home. I want to pray for that I find a place in church where I'm welcomed."

Peter Gathje: And I said, "Okay, we can pray about that and then I can give you some suggestions." So we prayed and then at the end of the prayer, I asked her, I said, "Can you tell me your story just a little bit? Where you came from, how you end up on the streets, et cetera." She said, "Well, I grew up in a minister's family and I'm a preacher's kid. And I got kicked out when I was about 16 when I was coming out as trans." And I said, "Well, that's pretty horrible." She says, "Yeah, and I started to hate myself and I ended up out on the streets. The only way I could survive was through prostitution, but the only way I could survive prostitution was by numbing myself with drugs. And so here I am."

Peter Gathje: Now, the good news is that person did find a church where she is welcomed. And also we are able to get her connected with a great organization here at Memphis called OUTMemphis, who now has a wonderful residential center for teenagers and slightly above teens who are out on the streets and need a safe place to live. So it's called Metamorphosis House. And it's really a great ministry that OUTMemphis does. But yeah, there are shelters in Memphis who won't take people who are trans or gay, lesbian. I'm just always frustrated and mystified by that.

Peter Gathje: It's like, "You're supposed to be practicing the love of Christ. I don't remember Jesus excluding people because they belong to a certain group." His whole approach was to welcome everybody. And that's because He was grounded in the love of God who welcomes everybody and who creates all of us and sustains all of us. As places of hospitality, we need to reflect the love that we've been shown by God that's inclusive. I mean, if God judged me on my sins or on my shortcomings or on my quirks and whatever, I'd be in hell right now.

Barbara Holmes: So would most of us.

Peter Gathje: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: And the other thing is that there's this presumption that there are free shelters and that in a lot of cities it's not free.

Peter Gathje: The cities that I've had experience with, a lot of the shelters charge. There are some cities that will have a free public shelter, but you probably wouldn't want to stay there. And the shelters that charge, I've asked... I mean, here in Memphis I've asked the person, "Why do you charge money?" He says, "Well, we're trying to get people to be responsible." I said, "That ignores that they're not on the streets because they've been irresponsible. They're on the streets because they don't have a place to stay." I mean, the federal government recognizes this with housing first policies. Get people off the streets into a stable, secure living arrangement and then all the other things can be

addressed. If it's psychological problems, if it's lack of a job, if it's addiction, all those kinds of things that come about as a result of homelessness could be undone once a person has a place to live.

Donny Bryant: You speak about churches providing shelter. Particularly in Memphis I know there are churches that partner with organizations to provide shelter. I had the privilege of volunteering and then actually leading a team to do that for a week in Minneapolis for a period of time. Can you speak to us about some of the limitations and some of the challenges that churches providing shelter face in trying to address some of the homeless situations particularly within Memphis?

Peter Gathje: In Memphis, the best organization that's doing shelters through churches is called Room in the Inn. I'm really proud it was started by Memphis Theological Seminary graduate and it's based on Room in the Inn Nashville that was started by a Roman Catholic priest. But it's basically this, that room in the end is a place where people can come and then be picked up by churches that are offering hospitality within their own space. So they're 12 people typically who go to each church, they're brought, they're put in a van or a bus or whatever, and taken to the church for a meal, for showers and a change of clothes and a place to sleep for the night. And then in the morning, a light breakfast. And they're brought back to the central place of Room in the Inn. And it works really well because it's small.

Peter Gathje: The worst shelters for anybody, whether they're the guests or the people staffing the shelter, are the big shelters because the bigger the shelter becomes, the less hospitality there is because hospitality requires welcoming relationships, knowing people's names, listening to stories, just being human with each other. That's hospitality. And so the great thing about Room in the Inn, Memphis is there's only 12 people who go and usually then the staff that's serving them, who are all volunteers at the church, there's probably six or eight of them as well. And maybe two or three that sleep overnight. I love the term, they're called overnight shepherds.

Peter Gathje: That's when you can sit down and you can play a game of cards or watch television together or just talk. That's when you get to know people and they get to know you. And that is how hospitality is mutually transformative. Those of who are offering hospitality, they get evangelized like we talked about earlier and those who are receiving the hospitality get their humanity reaffirmed and it builds their hope and their own love of self so that they're more capable of receiving housing and sticking with it once they get into some housing. That's what churches are best at.

Peter Gathje: What a church can do best is be a place of small radical hospitality. The churches by themselves are not going to solve the social problem of homelessness. That's a quest, that's a justice issue in which the resources for housing need to be redistributed so that everybody has housing. We need to pull housing from just being a marketplace distribution to something that's also a justice place distribution. And that's going to require law. That requires social policy to make that happen. And churches certainly can advocate and not exactly lobby because then they would be a nonprofit, but they can advocate for those kind of policy changes.

- Peter Gathje: And it really adds to your credibility as an advocate when you actually know people who are experiencing homelessness and you could say, “This is based upon our experience as the church offering hospitality, what people on the streets really need is housing.” Churches don’t have the resources to address a large social problem, but they do have the people resources that can offer this hospitality. And that could be a school, sort of using a Benedictine phrase, it’s a school for the Lord’s service that they would be able then to become advocates for people on the streets.
- Barbara Holmes: I’m thinking about the remark that your guest made by you being Pharaoh and being in charge. And I’m remembering back when Manna House opened and you used to have a power to protect your guests from the roasting of the police, which they were used to doing. And you would stop the officers who were, first of all, surprised that you were Anglo and that you were standing up for many African American homeless folk who were in the house. Is it any better now with the police?
- Peter Gathje: It’s gotten better around Manna House because they just don’t mess with us. So they learned their lesson. It took about eight years before they stopped doing that. But I’ll tell you what a real turning point was, it was a typical morning, everybody’s doing their thing in terms of hospitality. And I was just inside the house. It was a warm day so the windows were open. And just as I saw a police car pull into our driveway, which goes right into our backyard where most of our guests were. And I saw one of our guests, African American man standing in front of the police car with his hand up like stop in the name of love. And the police officer was starting to get out of the car. And I heard this guest call for me. He says, “Pete, Pete.”
- Peter Gathje: So I come out and the officer turns to me and I’m the white man coming down the scene. He says, “Are you in charge here?” And I said, “No, I’m not.” And I pointed to the guest, I pointed to Anthony. I said, “No, he’s in charge.” And Anthony looked at me like, “What are you doing?” And then he stiffened up and he said, “Yes, I’m in charge and you’re not allowed here.” And the police officer was stunned. He was being told he’s not allowed here. And so then I added, “Yeah, unless you are in hot pursuit or have a search warrant or something, you’re not allowed on the property.” He says, “Well, I can go where I want.” I said, “No, not under the US constitution. You can’t. Why don’t you call your superior officer and find out what your rights and responsibilities are as a police officer. And you will find out that you can’t just come into my home and Anthony’s home without our permission.”
- Peter Gathje: So he calls up his supervisor, more cop cars are coming and Anthony’s standing there. And each time they show up he says to them, “You’re not allowed in here.” And finally the supervisor came up to me and said, “Why are you not letting us in? What are you hiding?” And I said, “That’s a police state mentality. We’re not hiding anything. This is a place of hospitality for people on the streets. And quite frankly, sir, they’ve had a lot of bad experiences with your officers and with people like you. And so we don’t want you on the property. It’s not conducive to hospitality.”
- Peter Gathje: And I said, “Besides that,” and I pointed to his waist, I said, “You got a gun and we don’t allow any weapons on the property. So if you want to put your weapons down and come in for a cup of coffee, you’re welcome to do that. But you are not welcome

to come in here and just look around and try to intimidate our guests.” So they all loaded up and went away. That was a success story. But we’ve had volunteers. We had some volunteers who were arrested right out in front of Manna House when they started to use their phone cameras to record an arrest of a homeless person that was taking place, and they got arrested. Charges eventually were dropped, but they spent about 12 hours down at 201 Poplar, at the jail before they got out. But I’ll just say the Memphis police, it’s been much better I’d say in the last four or five years.

Peter Gathje: They leave us alone. I think they’ve finally taken the attitude that one of the things I had shared with them, I said, “Your job’s out there,” and I pointed to the streets. “Our job’s in here. We’re offering sanctuary. They’re two different jobs. Hopefully you’re doing yours professionally and with compassion. And we’re going to try to do the same.” So I want to tell one story about a police officer who did do something with professionalism and compassion. Police car pulled up in front of our house, Manna House, one morning. And police officer got out, walked up to me because I looked like Pharaoh. And he said, “I got one of your guests in the back of the squad car. And I picked him up over at one of the local hospitals.” I said, “Really? What’s going on?”

Peter Gathje: He said, “Well, they wanted me to arrest him for trespassing. He had been sitting in the emergency room and wouldn’t leave.” So they had called me in.” Said, “I don’t want to arrest him for trespassing. He just needs to shower and a change of clothes. Would you be willing to do that? Can I turn him over to you?” And I said, “Yeah, that’d be great.” And then the officer said, “Arresting people is just a real pain in the ass. I don’t want to go downtown, fill out all the paperwork. You’re doing me a favor. You’re doing him a favor.” And I said, “We’re happy to do you this favor.” And the guy came in and got a shower and a change of clothes, which he really needed.

Barbara Holmes: Wonderful.

Peter Gathje: That’s a good police officer.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Yeah. It’s been cold in Memphis. I’m in Florida. So I’m really glad I’m not there because it has been really cold. And you wrote this article on your blog about a Manna House guest who said to you, “If I die tonight in the cold, no one will miss me.” Do you want to speak a little bit about that incident and what inspired that blog?

Peter Gathje: Yeah. We have a little warming center in the backyard now. COVID, we’re not all gathered in the house in the winter. We’re in larger space in the backyard. I was standing back there just talking with guests and listening to their stories. And this guest started to share with me what he was feeling and that’s when he said, “If I die tonight, nobody will miss me.” Because what we were reflecting on is there’d actually been a person on the streets who had frozen to death just about a week before, on the streets in Memphis. And I knew him a little bit and certainly the guests on the streets knew him much better. And so he was reflecting on that person’s death and it just struck me as... It was heartbreaking to hear something like that.

Peter Gathje: If I die tonight, no one’s going to miss me, it’s really saying I am so cut off from community, from my fellow human beings that I’m totally isolated and alone. And

so I just wanted to express my own connection with that person and say, “You’re not going to die, first of all. We’re just not going to let you die tonight if at all possible. But secondly, if you did die, we’re still here. We’re going to remember you. We’re going to lift you up in prayer.” And I said, “You’ve been here for memorial services. We remember those who have died and we remember people with fondness and with sadness.” I said, “But don’t die tonight. Let’s get you into a shelter and make sure that you stay warm.” But really it’s the pathos of homelessness. It’s that deep suffering that people on the streets have.

Peter Gathje: Again, I’ve not experienced that because I’ve never been homeless. I’ve spent 24 hours out on the streets, and that’s really been great because people who are on the streets then provide me with hospitality and they protect me as we go through 24 hours on the streets, but that’s just such a teeny tiny little taste. Just not even anywhere near the reality of I don’t have any place to stay tonight or I’m going to sleep under this bridge tonight, or I’m going to get into this abandoned building and try to stay warm, start a fire and hope that the whole building doesn’t go up in flames. I don’t know that experience. I can just hear the stories. And then what I’m trying to do in my blog really, radical hospitality is to share those stories so that people who see themselves as not having a voice, that their voice can be heard.

Barbara Holmes: You touch hearts. And not only that, but there is a way in which the gospel is lived out in an everyday kind of way, without platitudes, without evangelical musings. You could have said to that gentleman, “Oh, but God is waiting for you in heaven, and you have a white robe,” but you didn’t. You said, “We’ll miss you.” And that’s something that’s very real. And I admire that about you. And just to let the audience know that it’s not just homelessness and education that you do, but also amazing work around farming food and faith. Is this from your roots in Minnesota?

Peter Gathje: Maybe it is a little bit. I had an uncle who was a farmer and my parents would farm us out to him for a few weeks each summer to get a break. My parents, God bless them, they had six children and five of them were boys. So they’d send us, my older brother Steve and myself would get farmed out to my uncle Everett [inaudible 00:42:06] farm. It’s a small farm, 150 acre dairy farm in Southern Minnesota. We loved it. We loved going out there. We’d work in the morning and then we’d play out in the fields and the creek that was nearby in the afternoons. But I can’t really claim that I have much in the way of farming roots other than that. I’ll tell you how this happened, is how this developed was I was teaching a course at Memphis Theological Seminary, the churches called the radical hospitality.

Peter Gathje: I was standing with one of the students in the backyard at Manna House as the end of the week intensive. And I said, “So what do you think? How’d the course go for you?” He goes, “Well, it’s a great course. I really loved it, but I’m not really sure how it translates to my context.” I said, “Well, what is your context?” He says, “Well, I’m going to pastor at a small church out in the country. We have about 35 members and most of them are farmers.” And I was new at the seminary and I said, “Well, isn’t there a course on rural ministry?” “No, there’s no course on rural ministry.” So I went to the seminary administration. You were gone by then, Barbara. And I said, “Why is there not a course on rural ministry?” They said, “Well, there’s nobody to teach it.” This is so

typical of academics, right?

Barbara Holmes: Right.

Peter Gathje: We're such urban people. And if we do have country roots, we try to get rid of them. We go and become big shots with PhDs. So I knew I couldn't teach a course on rural ministry, but I could teach a course on maybe the ethics of food production and distribution. And then I'll tack on at the end, I'll get some rural ministers to come in and talk about rural ministries. So that was the first time I offered the class and I like alliteration so I called it farming, food and faith. Well, out of that class being offered numerous times, eventually came our doctor of ministry program in land, food and faith formation, which is really exploring... Where students explore the connections between the urban and the rural. Urban places can't survive without rural places. And rural places really need urban places too.

Peter Gathje: And the church is an institution that transcends both of those, right? We have churches in rural areas. We have churches in urban areas. What if churches learned how to be in cooperation with each other, relationship with each other across those boundaries so that the urban areas can be transformed and the rural areas can be transformed, that people can be enlivened in both contexts? And that's what we're trying to do with the [inaudible 00:44:47] program. I think we're the only one in the country that's really looking directly at this issue right now of land, food and faith formation house. How's faith connected to what we do with the land and how the land produces food, but how do we eat? What kind of food are we producing and how is all that tied into rural and urban context and our faith communities? So it all came out of a student sharing his truth with me and me being naive enough to think I might be able to teach something about it.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. I learned more from the students, I think, than I taught.

Peter Gathje: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: Where do you see yourself five, 10 years from now?

Peter Gathje: Besides retired from the seminary? I mean, I see myself doing the same work. This is my vocation. My vocation is to hospitality and my vocation is to try to build relationships between people who see themselves as different from each other or disconnected. So I think I'll stay involved somewhat with the land, food and faith formation type work. I'll definitely be connected with Manna House and I'll continue with various forms of social justice advocacy. I've been very much involved with the abolitionist movement about the death penalty here in Tennessee. Hopefully in 10 years we won't have a death penalty in Tennessee, but who knows? But that kind of work, trying to listen to folks who have something important to say about what's going on in our society and then working with them to try to change the injustices that exist and that's a job that never stops because we're well short of the kingdom of God.

Barbara Holmes: Sure, are.

Peter Gathje: Yeah. Unless [crosstalk 00:46:39] Jesus comes back in 10 years, takes care of the rest, I'll probably be doing the same kind of work.

Barbara Holmes: May it be so.

Peter Gathje: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Could you tell us a little bit about your grandmother's outreach to the homeless?

Peter Gathje: Yeah. This was something I found out about my grandmother after she had died. It was really shortly after we started Manna House. My mom was talking with me and she said, "Well, your grandmother welcomed people who were... What we would call homeless now to our house." And I said, "Really? I'd never heard that before." And she said, "Yeah. Well, grandma's house as you remember was by the railroad tracks and during the great depression and really before and even after that, people would be coming through on riding the rails and she would welcome them to have a meal off her back steps. And so the house really got to be noted for a place of hospitality and actually was marked by people passing through that this was a safe house. This was a sanctuary house that you could count on the person here to give you a meal. No questions asked."

Peter Gathje: And I thought, "Wow, that's amazing that my grandmother had done that work. I had no idea." Though I really wasn't surprised. She was always a very hospitable person to us kids. On the way to the swimming pool down the street from where she lived, we could always stop in for a snack, going and coming, but I had no idea she had been serving people who hobo off of the rail line there for, I don't know how long. As long as people came through on the rails, I guess.

Donny Bryant: Could you also tell us about being a Benedictine monk and living those values out in community?

Peter Gathje: So yeah, I was a Benedictine monk a long time ago. It was when I was fresh out of college, 40 something years ago. But when I joined the Benedictine monastery, St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, and I had gone to St. John's University as an undergrad. So I knew the monks. I knew a number of the monks. And what attracted me to the monastic life at that time was the discipline and the schedule of prayer and work. And Benedictine, one of their mottos is ora et labora, prayer and work. And I liked the structure and I love the sense of being in this spiritual journey with others in community, that it wasn't just focused on one's own self, but that by being in a community of persons who are devoted to the spiritual life, we can help each other along the way.

Peter Gathje: And sometimes that help is almost negative, like learning how to put up with people that you don't particularly like and living with them in community. But what stuck with me over all these years is that regular time for prayer. I think it's important to start the day in prayer, have some times during the day in which the day is interrupted by prayer, then prayer in the evening as one is ending the day. That has stuck with me and it's been an important part of hospitality, that before we open, I always make sure that I have some time for prayer. It just so happens that the monks of St John's pray

at 7:00 in the morning. They're very laid back and we happen to open at 8:00. So I usually get to Manna House at about 7:00 in the morning, and that's when I do my morning prayer. And so that's been important for me.

Peter Gathje: And then the rule of St. Benedict, which is just masterful, but chapter 53 in the rule is on the reception of guests. And that chapter begins with that all guests are to be welcomed as Christ. That's been a central conviction on the part of we who run Manna House, that the guests who come are the very presence of Christ. So I think that's stuck with me all these years as well. Say too when I first really got involved with work of hospitality is with the Open Door Community in Atlanta. And I'll never forget the first night I was there and I was assigned to a room. It was down in the basement of this large house. And it was a very small room and I thought, "I've come back to the monastery. This simple room and the work of hospitality and regular life of prayer in community, that's all Benedictine monasticism again."

Peter Gathje: So not surprising, Dorothy Day who was one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement was good friends with a number of Benedictine monks, including Virgil Michel, who was a Benedictine monk at St. John's Abbey. I never knew him. He was dead long before I joined the monastery, but he was really a pioneer in liturgical reform within the Catholic church, especially in the United States. And he saw the connection between liturgy of the hours, Eucharist and the offering of hospitality. I think he saw that in large part because he was a Benedictine.

Donny Bryant: Your work is truly something that we all should mirror. It's truly an inspiration and a model to how to live a life of compassion, to seek justice, to seek reconciliation within various aspects of our culture and our lives. So I just want to say thank you.

Peter Gathje: Well, thank you for having me on here. And when somebody says something like that, I'm a little afraid that people listening might think, "Oh, he's extraordinary." Really what Manna House is ordinary people recognizing that they can do extraordinary things when they come together in community. So Manna House is not about me. It's about the people from the streets and from our house who have come together and said, "Let's create a place in which we can all be welcomed together." And that's what we need more of in our society, is places where people who are different from each other can find a space together and say, "Let's just sit down and have conversation and see what happens," and that's all we've done.

Peter Gathje: And we're small. One of the things that I've learned from the Catholic Worker Movement is to start small and stay small. So some people say, "Well, I can't do this because we don't have the resources or don't have the time." We're all volunteers. There's no paid staff at Manna House. We're only open two mornings a week, and then one afternoon for a meal. So we're not a big operation. And I think that's important to say, look, hospitality is about smaller, consistent action, not big flash in the pan stuff. That's what we try to do. Small, consistent, welcoming of people and letting ourselves be welcomed as well.

Barbara Holmes: Thank you for your dedication and for your friendship, Pete.

Peter Gathje: Sure. Thank you, Barbara.

Barbara Holmes: So good to have you.

Peter Gathje: It's all your fault and I'm at the seminary.

Barbara Holmes: Oh, what a wonderful thing that is. Be blessed.

Peter Gathje: I feel very blessed. It's great having this conversation with you. It's enlivening to be asked questions and to get to reflect together with both of you.

Barbara Holmes: Thank you.

Donny Bryant: Thank you.

Barbara Holmes: Thanks for listening. We'd like to leave you with the reflection from this episode.

Donny Bryant: There is an underlying theme in that conversation, even his story about Moses, of this concept of radical hospitality. Radical hospitality as he defines is going to the root of the meaning of hospitality, meeting people in the midst and at the point of their suffering. This concept of being with, almost an idea of incarnation, if you will. Just being present, not only in his stories, but in the action behind, the mission behind Manna House, this concept of radical hospitality.

Barbara Holmes: Oh, yeah. I mean, manna, God giving you just enough for today. I don't know. I'm used to getting a shopping bag and feeling it full so you have some leftover for tomorrow.

Donny Bryant: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: The question is, I guess, can we really live by faith? Can we really accept what God has for us for this moment and not worry about tomorrow?

Donny Bryant: Yeah. That is powerful because the concept manna, some Hebrew scholars would interpret that as what is it or it is what it is, or it is whatever you need it to be. It is sufficient. As you indicated, it is more than enough. And so this idea of faith as you interjected there, is the ability to accept that what you have is more than enough, that it is fully sufficient. Oftentimes when we are out there trying to serve others, we find that there is a reciprocity that those who are suffering, that we are trying to alleviate suffering, somehow miraculously become a healing bomb even in our own lives. And he speaks about that with Moses in the story of Moses and how Moses, his wisdom and Moses' maturity became such a presence that brought some level of maturity and wisdom and stability even his own life as the leader of Manna House.

Barbara Holmes: To be present with the homeless even if you don't have the change to give, the smile, to say, hello, how are you doing? Enough for today.

Donny Bryant: Yeah. And so a question maybe we could present to our listeners is how do you or how do we shorten the gap between us and the people within our lives who are suffering?