

June 29, 2008
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A WELCOMING SPIRIT
Matthew 10:40-42

When I was in high school one of my best friends was David Fender. Whenever I visited David's home, his dad would greet me at the door with these words, "Act like your welcome!" This particular greeting always puzzled me. Was Mr. Fender kidding or did he really mean it? "Act like your welcome!" When I asked David what his dad meant, my friend admitted he never knew for sure. Now Mr. Fender was always cordial or so it seemed. After hearing him say this a number of times, I decided that he actually meant it. So I would in fact act like I was welcome!

Over the years whenever I visit someone's house, I remind myself of Mr. Fender's words. I just assume I should act like I am welcome. Now there have been times when I was quite mistaken in that assumption. But most of the time I have been received graciously, with a welcoming spirit. I am immensely grateful that ministers are still invited into people's homes. It is one of the few professions where one is ushered into someone's private quarters. And for that I am immensely thankful. Let me say that you the good people of St. Andrew have been especially hospitable. How I have been blessed to visit in your homes. Because of your hospitality, I have in fact acted like I was welcome.

Our text from Matthew's Gospel is about hospitality. Jesus is instructing his disciples about their mission in the world. He gave his disciples a charge to preach and teach and heal the lost sheep of the house of Israel. They are to enter the homes of all those who receive them and greet them with words of peace. If they are not welcomed then they are to shake off the dust from their feet and seek out those who are receptive. Jesus reminds his disciples that they are like sheep among wolves. And continuing the animal analogy, they must be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. But they are not to be afraid. They must realize that Jesus did not come to bring peace but controversy and division.

So he says in our text that whoever welcomes them in truth welcomes Jesus and the God of Israel who sent him. These welcoming folks will be rewarded for receiving the prophets of God, those who are righteous. Even a cup of cold water offered to little ones will be rewarded. They will hear the good news of the coming Kingdom of God. They will see the healing spirit that the disciples bring to all the villages of Israel.

Here clearly hospitality is rewarded. Something mysterious and wonderful happens when people open their homes and their hearts to the disciples of Jesus. That's always been the case when hospitality is offered, even to strangers. Like those guests who showed up unannounced at the tent of Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre. They came with an astonishing announcement to make. This quite elderly couple, according to these three visitors, would soon have a child. It was the kind of announcement that made the old couple laugh. But nine months later it was no laughing matter when Isaac arrived on their doorstep-and not by means of a stork. The book of Hebrews reminds us that we should always be hospitable, because in fact we may be entertaining angels unawares.

Perhaps you remember that story in I Kings 17 when the prophet Elijah calls down a drought upon the wicked King Ahab. God tells Elijah to hit the road and seek refuge in the land of Sidon, what is now southern Lebanon. He is told to visit a widow of Zarepath who will feed him. Though she was not even an Israelite, the famous prophet from Israel showed up at her doorstep in the midst of this terrible drought.

At first Elijah asks for water and she gives him something to drink. And then he has the audacity to ask for some food. Little did Elijah know that she has saved her last bit of oil and flour to make a final meal for her son and herself. They are at the point of starvation. Nevertheless, she bakes up her last morsel of food and sets it before this prophet from out of town. And then Elijah promises that her jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail. There will be more than enough food for her and her son.

One cannot but recall the words of the Twenty-third Psalm: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." And indeed the cup did overflow for both Elijah and the widow of Zarepath-even in a time of famine. Here a welcoming spirit leads to a life-giving blessing.

Henri Nouwen once wrote this about the poor and their capacity for hospitality: "Poverty makes a good host. Those who have little materially have nothing to lose. Their own life situation has freed them from the illusion that one can have everything under control. Their only hope is that God will provide, and if that is true, why not share." Out of her poverty this widow from a foreign land gives her last bit of food to a stranger from afar. And for that her life was immensely blessed.

Hospitality is not just about inviting over your friends and your relatives. It is inviting into your life the stranger, the one from afar, even the one who seems to be an enemy. A welcoming spirit opens up one's heart and one's home to the other, the one I don't know, the one I am not sure I

can trust. It's three strangers at your door telling you that your life will change forever. And you try to hide your laughter. It's a prophet from afar who asks for your last morsel of bread. And you try to hide your fear.

In his great parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus says that sometimes he comes to us as one unknown, in disguise. Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Not just angels unawares, not just a prophet from afar, but Jesus himself. That is the real identity of the stranger we are welcoming. Paul reminded us, "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you." Because we have been welcomed, we welcome the sister and brother who is the Christ incognito among us.

When Jesus came to visit, his hosts almost always seemed to recognize that their guest was special. But not always. Once Jesus visited in the home of Simon the Pharisee. A woman of the streets entered into Simon's home and began to anoint Jesus' feet with alabaster ointment. She wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. It is one of the most poignant moments in all the Gospels.

But Simon the Pharisee is scandalized. Then Jesus notes that upon entering the house no one gave him water to wash his feet. In other words, Simon did not treat him hospitably. But the woman of the streets did. His feet were washed and his presence was noted with gratitude. And that is why at the end of this story Jesus forgives her and sends her away with his blessing. What a surprising twist to this dinner party at a Pharisee's house!

The notion of hospitality is enshrined in the Benedictine's understanding of the guests who come to their monasteries. The Rule of St. Benedict insists that monks welcome strangers as though they were welcoming Christ himself. I have experienced that uncommon hospitality every time I have stayed at Christ in the Desert Monastery, that lovely place outside Abiquiu that has become very dear to me these past twenty-five years. The Benedictine brothers and sisters there greet me like a long lost brother. It means more to me than you can know.

But let no one say that hospitality is always easy. It can be risky. It can be unpredictable. It can even be dangerous. This goes beyond cookies and punch and "Can I get you something?" Hospitality is sometimes life changing. It can be transformative. The stranger becomes your guest. The stranger bears the face of Christ in your midst.

Michele Hersberger has written a book entitled, **A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises**. Anyone who has been involved in the Interfaith Hospitality Network knows of what Michele writes-the enormous surprise of offering a gracious welcome to those who in fact enrich your life more than you enrich theirs. Michele says that her experience of hospitality

launched her on a personal quest to meet God each day as she welcomed strangers. She decided to pray that God would be revealed to her in the face of strangers. It took her several weeks to muster up the courage to pray that prayer seriously. We all understand the trepidation in meeting strangers.

On the very day she offered that prayer, her doorbell rang. A fifty-ish woman stood before her with red-blond hair. She said to Michele, "I have this odd request. Pardon me for asking, but I noticed your lovely red roses in your yard. My mother loves roses. She lives in one of the apartments behind you and she is very sick with cancer." Michele looked away in an effort to hold back her tears. She knew that something astonishing was being presented to her. Michele also knew she did not have lovely roses. Rather five scraggly pink things. But she went and got her scissors and cut the roses for this stranger who had knocked at her door. It was the least she could do for one who came seeking help for her very ill mother.

The stranger at her door simply wanted something to take to her mom. That's all. Just five scraggly roses. But this was an answered prayer. What surprises await those with a welcoming spirit!

In our time, the stranger at our door is from all over the world. They come to us from every continent. Here they often migrate to us from south of the border. They come to us from down the street, from across town. They look for a welcoming spirit. They need someone who cares. Will we see in them the face of Christ? Will we welcome them into our homes, our churches, our places of work, our schools, our clubs, our lives? In many cases, their future depends upon it. In truth, our future-our spiritual future-depends upon it as well.

I hope you will consider offering the same prayer that Michele Hersberger prayed. I hope you will pray that God will come to you in the face of a stranger. Perhaps you may see the face of Christ in one who seeks the roses in your yard or the welcoming spirit in your face. But be careful what you pray for.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

