

The Gift of Hospitality
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Matthew 10:40-42
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Sometimes hospitality shows up in the most unlikely places. President Barak Obama—a Democrat—and House Speaker John Boehner—a Republican—played golf a week ago at Andrews Air Force Base. They even played on the same team. I don't know who asked whom to play. And I'm not sure it changed anybody's mind about how to run the country. But I still think it was a good idea. Whenever we open ourselves up to another person, especially a person who thinks differently than we do, it has the potential to stretch us—to enlarge our view of the world and maybe even enlarge our view of God.

The Zumbro Church Council has been reading a book called *God's Welcome*. This effort is connected with our focus for the year of creating a place for all to belong. One of the devotions in the book is quite timely. It's entitled "Welcoming Political Strangers." It's based on 1 Peter 3: "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called."

The devotion makes a challenging proposal. The next time you find yourself in the company of people with different political views, how about—instead of getting into an argument with them, instead of wondering how they could possibly think the way they do—how about showing them hospitality? How about asking: "I truly want to understand your views on this. Tell me more. Why is it you feel the way you do?" As the conversation goes on, they may eventually get around to asking you what you think about the issue...or they may not. But that's not the point. The point is that you have shown genuine hospitality. You have gone out of your way to listen to them and to be a blessing.

Catholic writer Henri Nouwen describes hospitality as the creation of a space in our lives where a stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. I like that. I think it's important. We live in a great big, scary world. We're more on-guard all the time. We're more polarized all the time. It's easy for us to want to hunker down, especially with like-minded folks, and hang on for dear life. It's easy to want to characterize other people, even people we know well, as strangers, threats, enemies.

So what do you think, is it possible for us to create space in our lives for these strangers? Jesus seems to think so. In our gospel for today, he announces that the church is in the welcoming business. Sometimes we're the ones doing the welcoming. And at other times, somebody else is welcoming us. Either way, this becomes an opportunity for those who are strangers to become friends. And hopefully this becomes an opportunity to enlarge our view of the world and maybe enlarge our view of God.

At first glance, the welcoming picture Jesus paints is warm and cozy. His disciples are being sent on a mission. He expects people to show them hospitality. It's part of the culture of the day. "Whoever welcomes you is actually welcomes me and my message," he says, "And whoever welcomes me, is welcoming the one who sent me. They don't have to offer you something grand; even a cup of cold water will be enough."

Jesus makes hospitality sounds easy. And sometimes it is. Try the two-minute connection following worship to get to know someone who's not familiar to you. Bring over a plate of brownies to a new neighbor. Do some reading for an elderly woman who's lost her eyesight. "Go to these people," Jesus is saying, "and if they welcome you, it will be as if they are welcoming me." And what a nice, cozy church we will be!

But let's be honest, hospitality isn't always this easy. Read the verses in Matthew leading up to today's gospel. As the disciples go from village to village, sometimes people slam the door in their faces. "Don't worry about it," Jesus encourages them, "Shake the dust off your feet—shrug your shoulders—and move on." Then the picture gets darker. "You might feel as if I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Governors and kings might throw you in jail. Your own family might turn you in to the authorities. In a great big, scary world," says Jesus, "showing hospitality can be a matter of life and death."

Clearly there will be days when hospitality isn't easy at all. Whether it's the First or the Twenty-First Century, following Jesus often comes with a cost. We might be tempted to circle the wagons and protect ourselves from the outside world. We might be tempted to close ourselves off from people who think and act differently than we do. We might be tempted to spend all of our time focused on ourselves and our little problems. But then Jesus comes along and says, "No! My church is to be in the welcoming

business. Spend all your time on yourselves and you'll shrivel up and die. But if you find somebody to welcome in my name, I will use you to bless the world.”

So what kind of welcome are we called to offer? It depends on the situation. Sometimes it's simply a cup of cold water or a plate of brownies. Sometimes it more. Sometimes it's a potluck dinner for a cycling group passing through town while raising money for cancer. Sometimes it's a conversation with Uncle Henry about his views on gay marriage? Sometimes it's an invitation to a Muslim family to come over for dinner. Remember, whenever we share the gift of genuine hospitality, we are creating space in our lives for a stranger to enter and become a friend and instead of an enemy. And, God willing, we are being the blessing we are called to be.

How important is this? I think very important. Did you know that the fastest growing “church” in our country isn't really a church at all—it's the “church of the unaffiliated”? People are dropping out of church left and right. Many of them are young people. You want to know one of the main reasons they're leaving: because they think the church is too judgmental, too self-righteous, too hypocritical. They're looking for us to stop squabbling about divisive issues and instead start living like Jesus. They want to see us truly welcome people, truly love them, and truly care for each other.

This coming fall we have an opportunity to welcome some young people to Zumbro. Thirty to thirty-five nursing students from Luther College in Decorah will be spending the year with us. Their classes will be held on Mondays and Wednesdays here at the church. We'll have to juggle our schedule. But think of the opportunities. We'll be surrounded by young people with a whole new way of seeing the world. We'll be surrounded by young people who need a home away from home.

Why are we doing this? Because the church of Jesus is in the welcoming business. Sometimes we're the ones doing the welcoming. Sometimes others are welcoming us. I wonder: what would happen if we truly believed that we bear the welcoming presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, in every school, in every workplace, in every neighborhood we enter? Would we talk differently? Would we act differently? How do you think would God use us?

I can tell you what happened to me one day. I had my car break down in a small town in Nebraska. Probably less than 50 people. No restaurant. No motel. Fortunately

there was an auto repair shop. The guy said he could fix my car, but it would take a couple of days. He'd have to order the parts from Grand Island. The trouble was, I didn't have a couple of days. I had a funeral the very next day in Colorado.

Somewhere in the middle of our conversation, a stranger walked into the shop. He looked like a nice enough fellow. He heard we had a broken down car. He heard we needed to get to Colorado for a funeral. Without batting an eye, he said, "You know, I'm not doing much today. How about if I drive you to Grand Island and we'll pick up those parts?"

I was stunned. Grand Island was 100 miles away. But that's exactly what the man did. I was overwhelmed by his generosity. I kept saying, "You didn't have to do this. Why are you doing this? You didn't have to do this?" Finally he stopped me in mid-sentence and said, "No, I didn't *have* to do this. I *wanted* to do this. I'm a follower of Jesus. And this seemed like something Jesus would want me to do."

Sometimes hospitality can show up in the most unlikely places. It might be a golf game. It might be a car ride across Nebraska. It might be a cup of cold water. When it happens, our view of the world and maybe even our view of God get just a little bigger.

It comes down to this: Create some space in your life. Bear the welcoming presence of Christ to another. And wait to see what blessings God can do through you. Amen.