

Hospitality as an action and as a state of being has been warped in our world today. It now means complimentary shampoos in hotel rooms and a wine list at a restaurant. It means hidden fees at the end of hotel bills and a smiling face when you enter a Wal-Mart. It meant something far different in Jesus' time and the time of the early Church, I can assure you that. Indeed, the Bible is filled with examples of hospitality.

In the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah receive the Lord in the form of three men at their camp. Imagine what you might do if three strange men appeared at your front door. Abraham runs to greet them, bowing before the men and asking that they not pass by his tent. He immediately implores them to wash their feet before staying for a meal. He does not skimp on the meal, either. He personally selects a choice steer to be prepared. The reward for such hospitality? The Lord predicts that Sarah, though advanced in years, will conceive and give birth to a child. It is a good thing Abraham did not let the Lord pass by.

In the Gospels, countless times Jesus welcomes the stranger, the other, the undesirable, to share a meal with him or to walk a ways down the road, culminating with my favorite passage in the Gospels: the Road to Emmaus. Although we tend to be more familiar with stories from the Gospels than the Old Testament, let me summarize this story as well. In Luke's Gospel, the very first people to encounter the risen Christ are two men on the road to Emmaus, a village seven miles from Jerusalem. They are discussing the events of the trial, death, and empty tomb of Christ when He Himself joins them on the road. They, not recognizing their Lord's presence, describe how they had hoped Jesus would be the redeemer of Israel, but that they had been wrong. Jesus rebukes them for not recognizing that his death and resurrection had been predicted in Scripture. When the two disciples come to the end of their journey in Emmaus, they insist that Christ stay with them for a meal and rest, though He seems hesitant, they urge hospitality upon Him. He breaks bread with them, and it is then that they realize He is the risen Lord. Never have two men ever in the history of the world been more blessed to have invited someone to stay with them at the end of a long day's journey. Their hospitality led to their proclamation of the risen Christ to all the disciples.

I have always loved the beginning of this story for its frankness about how quickly Christ's disciples could have given up faith that He was the Chosen One. It is so human, and Christ demonstrates His acceptance of our imperfection, our predilection toward disbelief, by walking with us anyways to once again show us who He is. However, in developing the idea of the Modern Catholic Pilgrim, I have grown in my appreciation for the end of the story. Seven miles in the heat of the day is no easy task, but immediately, they set out once more the seven miles back to Jerusalem to

share the joy granted them through breaking bread with our savior Jesus Christ. No pause for rest. Their hearts burned within them. This devotion directly stems from their practice of hospitality to the stranger. Think of what your parish, what any parish, could accomplish with such a flame burning in the hearts of its members.

Scholars point to a law of hospitality in biblical times. Certain customs had to be followed. Should a guest or host not adhere to the customs, it could be punishable by death. Death! Imagine forgetting to offer a cup of coffee to a guest in your home, then receiving a nice whack to the head for it. We, in our world, find this egregious and outlandish yet we can still learn from such a law. In biblical times, almost all lived in small villages or camps in which it would be an absolute shock to come upon a stranger in the routines of day-to-day life. Should a stranger come out of the desert and into the village or camp, it would be cause for alarm. Why is this person here? What is his purpose? The stranger is the other, the unknown. So, what is the response of the village elders? Kill the stranger that instant as an intruder? Cast the stranger back out into the desert to suffer without replenished supplies? These are adequate ways of protecting a group, and we may see some similarities to how the stranger is treated in our world today. Still, these ways remove any possibility for discovering the stranger to be a friend, someone with a shared humanity.

The people of biblical times recognized this, so they determined a far better way to handle such a situation. They would embrace the stranger as a guest. Thus, the threat the stranger represents is removed. It is a hostile situation no longer. Victor Matthews, a scholar of biblical hospitality, writes, "This stranger was given new status as a guest, thereby removing the hostile overtones associated with the different and unfamiliar." Accepting the stranger as a guest meant providing food, drink, and shelter. It meant fair treatment and even an obligation to offer the guest anything upon which the guest gazed for an extended time. Again, we may find this outlandish, but it served a purpose. The stranger was taken care of and became a guest, and the threat to the livelihood of the camp or village was eliminated.

This sense of hospitality continues beyond the Old Testament and the Gospels. The Acts of the Apostles describes a group of people radically dedicated to their faith and to each other. All peoples are accepted into the group so long as they are willing to give up what was once "theirs" to make it "ours." The Letter to the Hebrews contains these beautiful lines: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels." In Paul's first Letter to Timothy, he includes being hospitable as a requirement for the office of bishop. It is mentioned time and time again as something expected of Christians. Rowan Greer, professor at the Yale Divinity School, writes that it was this Christian hospitality

that caused the Roman Empire under the rule of Julian in the 4th century to create a system of hospitals and hospices to promote paganism and compete with the “Galileans.” The Emperor Julian recognized it was Christian hospitality that most compelled people about the new faith and drew them away from paganism. Thus, we see how true hospitality, something we are called to take part in as Christians, can force even the most powerful to change and cause non-believers to be evangelized.

Still, things had changed by the time of Julian. Already in the 4th century, we begin to see the institutionalization of hospitality within the Church. It is the Church that set up Christian hospitals. It is the bishop who is required to be hospitable. As the Church grows and gains converts, the immediate nature of hospitality on a person-to-person level begins to fade. We can imagine the Christian of that time fulfilling a role many of us have played at some point. “I do not need to be welcoming to that person because I know there is a place where she will be welcomed down the street. I contribute to its work through donations on Sunday,” or “I will let my bishop determine what is to happen to these people travelling through our land since it is his job to determine these things.” The institutional Church took firm control over hospitality, and it can appear as though the lay Church, the people, did not do a whole lot to object.

Fortunately, the Church is universal and encompasses so many disparate parts that things could not be quite that dramatic or black and white. One needs to look to a monastery or abbey as an example. The development of monastic life created a space filled with contemplative prayer while also creating a hospitable space. the Rule of St. Benedict, which is the guiding light for many monastic orders, makes clear the role of hospitality in the lives of the monks. From the Rule, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’” Can you imagine what would change for the better in this world if all of us adopted this portion of St. Benedict’s Rule? And, remember that he is stating something as a rule for his monks that was an expectation of all Christians in the early Church.

Henri J.M. Nouwen, the noted 20th century Catholic priest, psychologist, and spiritual writer, once wrote that hospitality is an obligation of all Christians, “to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.” He writes, “That is our vocation: to convert the hostis into a hospes, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.” Nouwen, writing in the last century, is using the same description for hospitality that was used

in the time of Christ over two thousand years ago. Turn the enemy into a guest. Our world can feel full of enemies these days. With the Modern Catholic Pilgrim, we aim to start converting some of those enemies back into guests.

- adapted from a parish presentation by Will Peterson