

Welcome! Don't Say It If You Don't Mean It

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The Third Sunday of Lent, March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-9/Matthew 10:40-42

The Jewish Torah says, "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 19: 33-34)

In the Gospels, Jesus says that how we welcome the stranger is how we welcome him. (Mathew 25:40)

Romans 12:13 commands us to practice hospitality.

Hebrews 13 teaches, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

The Quran says that we should "serve God ... and do good to ... orphans, those in need, neighbors who are strangers ... the wayfarer you meet, and those who have nothing." (4:36)

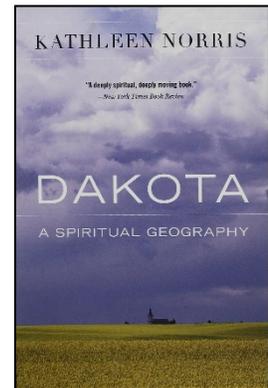
In the Hindu scripture, the unexpected guest is called the "atithi," literally meaning "without a set time." The atithi are to be treated as God.

Each of these diverse faith traditions teaches us to welcome others as siblings with love and compassion. Offering hospitality is a moral imperative. In the arid settings of the Middle East, hospitality was a survival grace.



There is an expectation that God's people especially will welcome the stranger. For God's people, our hospitality flows from gratitude for God's care and provision for us. When we welcome the stranger, we acknowledge her as one who is also made in the image and likeness of God. **Radical welcome and unconditional hospitality** mean that we are acting toward others in the same way God has acted toward us.

In her book "Dakota: A Spiritual Geography," Kathleen Norris tells a story said to come from a Russian Orthodox monastery. A seasoned monk, long accustomed to welcoming all guests, says to a young monk, "I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes," the monk continues, "I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, 'Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?'"



In their book "Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love," Father Daniel Homan, and Lonni Collins Pratt write:

Hospitality is the heart of Christianity. No one has ever been more radically welcoming than Jesus, who was always accused of associating with the wrong kind of people—people we wouldn't want in our living rooms, or next to us worshipping.

With everyone he encountered Jesus practiced acceptance. We tend to confuse acceptance with tolerance or even approval. But acceptance is about receiving, rather than judging. ... Acceptance is not about condoning, it is about embracing. ... When we accept, we take an open stance to the other person. It is more than piously tolerating them. We

stand in the same space and we appreciate who they are, right now at this moment, affirming the Sacred in them.

Most of us prefer the answers to life's most profound questions to be easy and neatly packaged. Hospitality is not neat and tidy, though. It requires us to grow, to change, to push back our boundaries and make room. The moment we engage with another person everything gets messy. We have to learn a new language, their language, in order to see things differently, to see things through their eyes.

Genuine hospitality always involves growing, changing, giving something of ourselves to others, and creating a space within that is open to what they have to give and teach us. That is why it is a spiritual practice.

Only the brave dare to keep the door of their lives ajar, but, if we close ourselves to the stranger, we risk closing ourselves to the Sacred. If we lock our doors and bolt our gates, we may be forbidding God to come to us. Following Jesus just may be a piece of what he meant in calling us to take up our cross.

Did you hear the radical unconditional welcome God extended to us in the Isaiah passage we read today? "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and if you have no money, come and buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk, without money and without price."

Apparently, God is a terrible capitalist, but the passage says that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be.

And this wasn't a one-time offer from God; in fact, if you read the Bible all the way to the end you discover that God extends the invitation again, just in case we missed it while reading Isaiah. It is virtually the last word from God to us in scripture.



In the Gospel lesson we read today, Jesus said that how we welcome others is how we welcome him. "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones ... is blessed." (Mathew 10:40-42) A cup of cold water is not only a gracious act of hospitality; it also can be a lifesaving action in a desert land in which water is so scarce it is considered sacred. Hospitality assumes that we have noticed that someone is thirsty and that we are willing to go draw water and offer it.

As Rev. Maria Palmer puts it, "It might lead us to pulling out a chair and inquiring about the rest of the family. It might lead to prayer, phone calls and being drawn into someone's life. It could lead to learning about his or her fears and hopes ..."

Letting ourselves be invited or chosen to share God's hospitality most likely will lead us to share feelings we might prefer not to know, like how a mother feels when she is being carted off to a detention center without her children.

Rev. Loren McGrail, who was the head of the Palestinian YWCA warns:

Understanding ourselves as sojourners in the universal quest for life allows us to share in Christ's Galilean identity, as the one who crosses borders and boundaries. ... Our identity as sojourners



allows us to stand against the powers of oppression and persecution, for we see the stranger as our self, our neighbor or as Reinhold Niebuhr put it, "Love rejoices in the otherness of the other." This inclusive borderless love helps us recognize our common kinship and "act accordingly, welcoming all into the many rooms of our God's house."

Hospitality of the heart begins when we accept that we all are wanderers and sojourners; we all are pilgrims seeking a final home. It is often said that life itself is perhaps nothing more than an exercise in all of us walking each other home.

It isn't enough to think of who it is that we need to welcome; we also must acknowledge our own need for hospitality. We all are guests invited to, and welcomed at, God's table without conditions or restrictions.

Authentic hospitality must rise from an awareness of our own experience of the grace of welcome. Only by this self-awareness can we make friends and family from strangers and potential enemies.

This hospitality of the heart is at the center of answering Micah's injunction to do justice, love mercy, and walk with humility. Hospitality of the heart is a form of spiritual resistance to an increasingly hostile and uncivil society. Hospitality of the heart is where justice and mercy meet because it compels us to make room for the thirsty, and the hungry, and the homeless because we know the thirst, hunger, and restlessness of our own hearts.



The Cabeza Prieta national wildlife refuge, which includes 56 miles of Sonoran Desert along the U.S.-Mexico border, is a stunningly beautiful wilderness. It is a vast, unspoiled arid land of wildlife and cactus, scrub brush and rattlesnakes.

In the past two decades, more than 7,000 human remains have been discovered along the U.S.-Mexico border. These men, women, and children were so desperate for a better or safer life that they tried to cross the desert without enough water.



Last year, a humanitarian group called No More Deaths discovered 32 bodies as they tried to put water and food out for the migrants to find. Although these volunteers are simply trying to save people's lives, border agents have destroyed 3,856 gallons of water.



Then, just this past January, four women were arrested and convicted for trying to put water and food in the desert, and another five humanitarians await trial.

Now, it is fair to have a debate about immigration and border security. It is fair that we have different views about those seeking to cross the border illegally. As people seeking to follow the Way of Jesus, however, the Bible's call to practice sacred hospitality and radical welcome should inform our views.

Lent begins with the story of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tested. With that in mind, perhaps we should ask, in the light of thousands of deaths in the desert for lack of water, where do think we find Jesus?



Perhaps more importantly, we should be asking, where would Jesus find us?

AMEN.