

Year A Proper 13 Matthew 10:40-42 Hospitality

At first reading – or hearing – an important point Jesus is making in this short little gospel story often gets swallowed up by the idea of rewards – a prophet’s reward, a righteous person’s reward, the reward of serving a child a cold glass of water. Jesus actually stresses what is done to receive the reward...he stresses the welcoming, the serving. In other words, practicing hospitality.

For many of us, when we hear the word ‘hospitality’, we think of entertaining others in our homes. It may be friends, or coworkers, relatives, or neighbours but, generally speaking, it’s people we *want* to have in our homes.

If we are discussing hospitality as church folk, chances are we will be thinking of being welcoming to the people who walk through our doors, of inviting them to socialize in the hall afterward, and – of course – inviting them to come back.

These are legitimate forms of hospitality but Jesus has more in mind. Jesus – as always – challenges us to think in a much more radical way. Our use of the word hospitality tends to be very tame and put into a rather limited category all by itself. The hospitality industry maybe has something to do with this. Hospitality is about being pampered, treated in a way you’re not normally treated, having a good time. The server in the restaurant seats you, pours your water. For Synod delegates, going to the hospitality suite means having pop and finger foods, laughing with the other delegates, relaxing after a long day. If you’re entertaining friends in your home, chances are you’ll be serving them an especially nice meal, maybe even splurging on an expensive bottle of wine to have with dinner. Hospitality is about having a good time with family or friends – people with whom

we share common interests. We provide hospitality to those people around us that we would like to have stay around us.

Over the years, people of this parish have knit or bought warm clothes to give to St. Vincent Place and slippers for the hospital, we gather gifts at Christmas to bring to the women's shelter, deliver Christmas cookies to those who can't get out, collect food for the food bank, and many other things. These things we do are not labeled as "hospitality." We almost certainly call these sorts of activities "mission" or "outreach", maybe even one of our "ministries." We think of them as "helping those less fortunate", "giving to the needy", "practicing social justice". But, in the vocabulary of Jesus, these things are called hospitality. Hospitality – the welcoming, serving, laughing with friends – the ones *Jesus* names as his friends – hospitality.

Jesus cared about social justice but Jesus was not an activist. Jesus cared about those in need but Jesus was not simply a "do-gooder". In Jesus, the kingdom of God was breaking into our world. In Jesus, we see the kingdom of God displayed in full view. In Jesus, God's abundant and generous hospitality was made flesh.

Jesus touched the untouchable flesh of lepers. Jesus took the hands of the outcast and gave them the best seat in the house. Jesus sat down to dine with the unwashed beggar who hangs out by the stores in the Churchill Plaza. Jesus wasn't doing "outreach". Jesus was showing them the hospitality of the kingdom.

This is a radical shift in the way we understand hospitality, in the way we understand *ourselves* as Christ's Body here on earth practicing hospitality.

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me,” Jesus tells his disciples. Jesus is sending them out to proclaim that the kingdom is here. Jesus is sending them out with no money, no change of clothes, and with no sandals on their feet. Just picture for a moment what those disciples will look like and smell like after walking a couple of days under the hot sun on dusty roads to get to the nearest village. Imagine one of them showing up at your door, not for a handout, but to *stay* in your home. Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, he told them. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes God. Jesus knew there would be people who would slam their front door in horror but, he also knew there were people who would show hospitality, who would welcome the stinky, dusty disciples into their homes and dine with them, care for them as friends.

We know from this gospel story that living out the hospitality of kingdom life – of warmly welcoming and serving everyone as friends was just as radical and difficult then as it is now. How do we know this? Jesus gives three examples of people to welcome and to serve – prophets, children, and a righteous person. People don’t like to see prophets wander into their town. Prophets point out that all the lavish eating and drinking and partying at the temples of idols, and making money by cheating poor people actually isn’t okay with God and prophets tell the people they’re going to experience some pretty serious consequences if they don’t change their ways. People try to shut down the prophets, to silence them, to make them go away – often by physically harming them. Welcoming a prophet – showing hospitality to a prophet – that’s going against the grain and could make you the target of some pretty nasty stuff too.

Children were loved by their parents (especially once the parents were pretty sure the child was going to live into adulthood) but they didn't eat at the same table and were often bargaining chips in arranged marriages designed to increase the wealth and status of the parents. "Children should be seen and not heard" is a phrase that would apply then in a way that does not apply among this generation's children. So, giving a glass of cold water to a child wouldn't get you killed but it would certainly earn you some surprised looks of contempt from your peers.

As for the righteous person – Jesus is referring to himself – the only truly, completely righteous human who walked the face of the earth. Jesus was scorned by the people in power, tossed out of his hometown synagogue, and eventually put to death. Like the prophets, his message about life God's way in God's kingdom wasn't welcome. Showing hospitality to Jesus, or to those proclaiming his same message, could land you hanging on a cross as well.

Kingdom hospitality is not an easy path. Warmly welcoming everyone as friends of Jesus is simply not the way the world works – not then, not now. But it *is* the way God's world works. Bringing the kingdom into the perfection of its fulfillment means struggling against the accepted norms of society – the individualism, the consumerism, the power structures, the catering to convenience...As Matthew would say, we must be the yeast in the dough that corrupts the corruption of the world.

I am not saying that you need to get over to the nearest homeless shelter after church and bring someone home to stay with you. If you feel called to do that, that *is* wonderful. First, however, we must change how we *think* and the mind is

the hardest thing to change. We call giving to the poor and to others in need, we call this “hand outs”. Hand outs. The hand is reaching out with something in it but the hand is also keeping those in need at a distance. Most people very carefully keep a wall firmly in place between themselves and those receiving the hand outs – I will give you money. I will give you food. I will give you whatever it is that you need in terms of material things but the wall is up – I will not offer friendship. I will not like you. I will not get to know you. You’re dirty. You smell a little. You probably do drugs. You might rob me or hurt me if I let you into my life. I must keep you at a distance...give you hand outs. Not a welcoming in...a handing out. Jesus commands us to engage in something different: a radical hospitality – reaching out with the hands of Christ means loving others not simply helping others. We do not hear Jesus say today, “whoever helps you, helps me.” He says, “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.” Jesus did not give hand outs. Jesus reached out and gathered in.

Jesus is pointing us to a shift in posture...changing our thinking so that it will lead to a change in what we do...not simply reaching out, but gathering in. It is a posture that reveals the joy, the love, the abundance of God’s kingdom – reveals these to everyone around us, as we warmly welcome the friends of Jesus.

“Whoever welcomes [them] welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Let us welcome God into our midst.