

32nd Sunday, Ordinary Time – The Mutual Interdependence of Hospitality

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When one approaches this text from 1st Kings from the framework of a 21st Century Western mentality, one might consider the prophet Elijah a bit of a rude cad for insisting that the poor widow feed him first before providing sustenance for herself and her orphaned son. But we must remember that during the time of the ancient prophets of Israel, and for generations throughout the entire ancient Middle East, hospitality was a moral imperative as well as a matter of honor. There were no clusters of motel chains at the outskirts of the village nor fast food places on every corner. Travel was dangerous, and anyone could be a traveler himself at any time. The traveling stranger at your door was considered your neighbor. It was not only a matter of ethical duty to care for the stranger, but also, a matter of honor. The host would be dishonored if he or she could not adequately care for the stranger. The widow was in essence saying to Elijah, “I regret that I do not have enough to provide you with much of a meal.” And Elijah was in essence responding, “Do the best you can, and the Lord will provide.” In this text we have an iconic example of the important role of hospitality in all of biblical times. The dynamics in this brief episode hint at the various dimensions that hospitality entails and what it might imply for us today.

The Latin root for hospitality is *hospes*. A Latin-English dictionary points out that *hospes* means stranger, and therefore guest, or even guest friend. The word *hospes* implies a relationship of automatic mutuality, a personal interdependence resulting in mutual duty and honor. For our purposes, also implied is a type of healing relationship, a relationship that would heal, or remedy, or relieve an otherwise dangerous or threatening situation if one were left out in the elements of both weather and highway banditry. In a somewhat related arena, more than one psychotherapist or counselor insists that the key to successful therapy is the therapeutic relationship itself between the caregiver and the recipient—a kind of professional hospitality.

To further elaborate the point of mutuality in a different arena of caregiving, at a recent convocation of Catholic priests dealing with the topic of priestly identity, the question was posed to the participants: “In all of your priestly ministry, when have you or do you feel most like a priest?” Eighty-five percent of the respondents said, “When I am ministering at the bedside of a dying person.”

I serve in a somewhat unique ministry as the rector of the Shrine of St. Joseph in St. Louis. Every Sunday we receive visitors from around the U.S. and the rest of the world. Some are tourists enjoying the Italian Renaissance architecture of the church interior. Many are pilgrims with special devotions looking for a place of inspiration. Many come with serious physical ailments or emotional burdens looking for some healing. Many pray for miracles. Our

volunteers at the Shrine are a wonderful group of faith-filled people whose personal hallmark is an ability to be effectively hospitable and welcoming. I often get feedback from our visitors that they are deeply moved by the welcoming hospitality they experience at the Shrine. I firmly believe that the mutual relationship established by the simplest welcoming hospitality of a handshake, a smile and a short greeting is the basis of any healing a visitor might be graced with at the Shrine. And I know, having served in several parishes, those similar opportunities present themselves before and after Mass with any given congregation on any given Sunday. With even just simple gestures of hospitality, which are part of our centuries old Judeo-Christian history going back to the ancient prophets like Elijah, we can all participate in the healing ministry of Jesus.

Consider Jesus in the context of this reflection. In the Gospels, what is he most notorious for? “Noted” indeed for teaching and spectacular miracles, yes. But “notorious” for the mutual hospitality through which he ministers during meals with those who most need healing, the famous wounded sinners epitomized by the proverbial prostitutes and tax collectors. Jesus repeatedly tears down, or rather simply ignores, certain religious and cultural mores of his time to reach out and extend welcoming warmth, love and mercy that lead to any number of personal, spiritual and emotional healings.

One of the most significant ministries in parishes where I have served is funeral lunches. It is a ministry where volunteers take for granted that they should simply cook and serve the bereaved, but don't consider this an official church ministry. But in my estimation, it is indeed an important ministry. Many have been the times when a family, in the midst of stressful and painful preparations for a loved one's funeral, forget about their own need for sustenance. The farthest thing from their minds is food for after the funeral. This is particularly true for young people who are experiencing family grief for the very first time. They are so relieved and grateful, when they return from the cemetery, to find that the parish volunteers have prepared a simple lunch for them. It makes a particularly important impression on those who have been away from the church for a while and cannot remember the church ever having done anything so tangible and immediate for them. Such moments of parish hospitality are very healing and often open the way to evangelization, which is exactly what Jesus knew and did.

Let's return to etymology and remind ourselves that *hospes* is also the root for “hospital.” In his first days as the bishop of Rome, Pope Francis told our leaders and through them, us, as well, that the church must not be a tribunal, but a field hospital seeking out and caring for the spiritually wounded. When I first heard this, the images that came to my mind were from the movie and television series M.A.S.H. In almost every episode there was a scene of helicopters bringing in the wounded and the otherwise disparate cast of characters came together as a team for triage. The only judgments that were made regarded who best and how best to serve the particular needs of each wounded soldier. The Holy Father is challenging not just church leaders, but all of us, to be alert and attentive and receptive to the needs of those around us.

Like Jesus and the widow with Elijah, he asks us to welcome them in a spirit of hospitality, a mutual, personal interdependence that can bring whatever healing is needed.

Rather than see the text about the prophet Elijah and the widow as anachronistic, perhaps this section of the inspired word is inviting all of us to consider a spirit of hospitality as our moral imperative and a matter of our Christian honor in order that we too may continue the healing ministry of Jesus in our everyday lives.