

2 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8 – Year A – June 29, 2011 - Homily
Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42
Susan E. Wilmot

It never fails to fill my heart with joy to see the member of Our Saviour in action. Our gifts of hospitality are especially evident this week, as we've opened our hearts and our doors to forty children so that we can share Christ's love, make a lot of noise, sing, have fun, and create a huge mess!

Tonight's reading from the Gospel of Matthew has only three verses, but includes the word "welcome" no less than six times. I think Jesus was trying to tell us something! For you and me, perhaps the hardest part is to go beyond what we already practice in our lives, and how we already share divine hospitality. When it involves our community of faith, we share our space with folks from the broader community through VBS, through our weekly N.A. meetings, through the White Mountain Women's Club, and in other outreach events throughout the year. Most of all, we welcome newcomers and visitors to worship with us, and we don't grumble too much when someone sits in our favorite pew. As the quote from Hebrews 13:2 on the sanctuary door says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." I know many of you embrace the philosophy that a stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet.

In tonight's Gospel, we need to be aware that Jesus was speaking to the disciples before sending them out as missionaries. Since most would go on foot, they carried little with them, and really did rely on the hospitality of others, complete strangers most of the time, for shelter and food during their extended travels. In turn, they took with them and shared the Good News of Jesus Christ, perhaps also offering some skilled labor, or finding some pick up work along the way. We don't really appreciate this kind of open house approach so much today, but it was a key aspect of the Jewish way of life to care for the strangers in their midst. So it's a little more challenging to dig a little deeper and consider our idea of hospitality when it comes to entertaining strangers in our homes. I'm probably right in line with most people here tonight when I tell you that 9.9 times out of 10, the folks that are invited to our home are people we already know, rather than strangers. There's a lot to be said for taking care of ourselves these days, when there are so many odd or even dangerous people around. So I'm definitely not encouraging anyone to start picking up strangers at the corner by Wal-Mart!

These days we usually have to get creative about how we help the homeless or complete strangers in our midst. Advocacy is a good thing, supporting organizations that help others is also a good thing, volunteering our time and gifts is great, and so is prayer. For example, we can advocate for a homeless shelter in our area. I know that Dave Sherman of the Salvation Army is working with me and other pastors, as well as other organizations to make that a reality. Again, our own community of faith has the COS community chest to help families who have little or nothing. We also support the Bread of Life Mission, which is currently the only shelter in the White Mountains. Several members of our parish volunteer at different organizations around the area, including Meals on Wheels, the Love Kitchen, the hospital, or the senior centers to name just a few. Offering up prayers to God for all types and conditions of humanity, as well as those we love, should be a daily activity, a moment-by-moment discipline for us all. God hears our prayers.

So far, we've talked about the kind of hospitality that we're most familiar with. But what if

we go even deeper now? What does it mean for Jesus to say, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me”? What would it mean for us to extend gracious divine hospitality filled with Christ-like compassion and love say to someone who really gets on our nerves, or to someone that we’ve decided we really don’t like that much? What about to someone we don’t know that well, or who is quite a bit different from us in some way, whether it’s by age or ethnicity? Okay, that’s making me a little uncomfortable now. Whoever welcomes a righteous one, welcomes me, says Jesus. That means we are extending a hand, our home to welcome Christ in others. A truly compassionate, Christ-like welcome eschews manipulation or personal gain. It doesn’t look for any kind of reward, especially not the return invitation! Compassionate and loving hospitality steers us away from distorting others and ourselves with false knowledge, unreasonable expectations, or unjustified hopes. We may even find that God is calling us to repentance, to turn away from our usual patterns and behaviors. We are all equal in God’s sight. In the realm of divine hospitality, our perceived privileges are completely debunked. Being comfortable in our old ways is not excuse, and may even be morally bankrupt. And even worse, love is not always met with love. Look what happened to Jesus. Yet genuine hospitality, true divine welcoming strives to offer, seeks to share, God’s love and compassion with everyone we meet. To offer hospitality makes us vulnerable to rejection. It makes us vulnerable to new or different people and situations, to the unfamiliar, and to the unknown. Love is always worth the risk. It is our primary mission to share God’s love with others, and Jesus encourages His disciples to risk it all in His name.

The rest of the world thrives on superficial hospitality that tends to reinforce injustice and inequality. As disciples of Jesus, our lives should reflect His life of love and grace, sacrifice and self-giving. We are ambassadors for the Lord in all we say and do. An ambassador carries the authority of the one who sent him or her. We have been sent, commissioned, by Jesus to share His love and mercy, to let others know about the hope of eternal life, and all the good things God has done for us. I don’t know if this is our biggest challenge or not. God will help each of us discern that as we ask for His help in prayer. Nonetheless, each of us is invited to consider our own welcoming of others, as those commissioned to be ambassadors for Christ in and through our entire way of life. What can we do differently? What can we change to open our hearts and minds to the Lord’s gift of hospitality? Author and theologian, Jason Foster, writes, “The entire Christian life can be seen through the grid of Incarnation and Hospitality”. As we already know, God’s hospitality extends to the whole of creation, and to giving us His son, His only son, whom He loves so that all may be reconciled to God’s self through Christ. To welcome others in Christ’s name, without judgment, expectation, or any other agenda is what we also know as *Practicing God’s graciousness*.

Amen.