

Proper 8, Year A: June 26, 2011

Back in the early years of this century, a Minnesota man who owned a general store made it a habit to offer a verse of scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. The group of locals who sat around the store in this rural area enjoyed the exchanges, particularly whenever a purchase challenged the imagination—or the honesty—of the store owner.

Well, one winter day a traveler from Iowa stopped in, wanting to buy a blanket for his horse. The regulars knew that the store stocked two types of blankets: one sold for \$60 and the expensive one cost \$89.95.

The storekeeper showed the first blanket.
“No, that’s not good enough. I need something warmer for my horse.”
He showed the second, more expensive, type.
“That’s not good enough either. Don’t you understand?
This is for my horse, and nothing’s too good for my horse.
Now show me your most expensive blanket!”

The onlookers became very quiet as the owner of the store reached under the counter to the \$89.95 stock, pulled out a plaid one, and spread it on the counter with great finesse.
“This is our finest, the only one I have.
Colorfast, 100% wool, with a very tight weave. It sells for \$250.”
“Now you’re talking; I’ll take it.”
The man from Iowa counted out the money, folded the blanket, and left with a big grin on his face.

As the shopkeeper opened the cash drawer and carefully counted the money, he said, “Matthew 25:35, altered version: ‘He was a stranger and I took him in.’”

Not exactly the kind of hospitality Jesus is getting at in that passage, or in today’s Gospel, I expect.
Nor is this shopkeeper quite living up to the standard of the baptismal promises we make as Episcopalians to respect the dignity of every human being and love our neighbor as ourselves.
Probably a Methodist.
Ba-dum-bum.

It’s easy to joke. Hospitality is hardly flashy, or spectacular, or heroic. It’s not one of the great themes like redemption, atonement, salvation. Yet it appears in Jesus’ teachings as an essential component of true discipleship. Take today’s passage.
First, Jesus speaks of welcoming.
He says to his followers, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.”

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

Which, when you think about it, is a rather amazing statement.
Just to welcome one of these little ordinary disciples is to welcome Jesus.

He then urges us to engage in an action even so small as “a cup of cold water.”
We are to perform acts of hospitality—
welcoming the stranger, offering the cup of cold water—
because, in Jesus, that is what has been done for us.
Jesus has reached out to us Gentiles,
we who were formerly excluded from the covenant of God’s people,
and included us in the kingdom of heaven.
And he didn’t overcharge us either!
We were all strangers, outsiders, and we have been brought into the family of God.
Jesus now urges us to show that same sort of gracious hospitality to others in his name.

As I said of spiritual growth last week, it’s not always easy, either.
Such hospitality often has a cost to it; it takes courage at times to offer hospitality
where others would offer only a door slammed in the face.
I think true hospitality—self-giving acts of generosity—
is probably never easy at some level.
I know that many of us wrestle with what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus.
Sometimes that sounds so remote, so heroic and distant.
What can I do to show the world that I am part of Jesus’ kingdom,
that I am a faithful follower of Christ?
Well, here’s your chance.
Here, in this text, we have been given something to do
that is within the reach of all of us.
We can show hospitality, those little, but deeply merciful acts of kindness and grace
that reveal to others the reign of Christ in our world.
And in so doing we are living out those other baptismal vows:
in which we promise to proclaim by example the good news of God in Christ,
and to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

Don’t knock the little acts of hospitality.
We live in a nation of strangers, a society in which walls are built between people.
Driving in our car, we glance over on the sidewalk and see a person of another race,
a different economic status, a way of life that varies from ours,
we hit the button and lock our doors.
We cower within our burglar-alarmed homes.
We pass people on the sidewalk and do not lift our eyes, preferring the hygienic—
and very false—intimacy of the internet, perhaps.

Of course, you may say, “But Theo, we do live in a world where bad things happen,
in which strangers sometimes reveal themselves to be enemies.
These are simple acts of self-protection.”

Ah. Suddenly a little virtue like hospitality takes on larger consequences.
In our world, the ministry of hospitality involves some risk.

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Perhaps it has always been like that,
was perhaps even more like that when Jesus urged his first disciples
to welcome others in his name, to reach out to others in need.
As I said a moment ago, in a risky, dangerous world,
a cup of cold water can be, in its own way, a courageous, risky act.

What might such hospitality look like?

I expect it runs a range, everything from wearing our name tags on Sunday
and printing more directions in the bulletin
so that strangers in our midst can feel more at ease,
to serving at the food shelf or Loaves and Fishes,
and could extend, if we wanted it to,
all the way up to offering temporary housing to the homeless here at Christ Church,
as part of the Interfaith Hospitality Network program.
And then there's hospitality on a more intimate level:
opening a door for a stranger, allowing another car to cut into traffic ahead of you,
not escalating the conversation when your child or spouse speaks in a heated tone.
In an uncaring world, a world where many receive only rebuke and rejection,
our little unspectacular acts of kindness and open generosity
can make all the difference, may be the only sign of the love of Christ
that some other person experiences.

You've seen the bumper sticker: "Practice Random Acts of Kindness."
In a way, that is what we are talking about when we talk about hospitality.
But these acts of kindness are not random.
They are our obedient, quite intentional way of showing forth to the world
that Jesus makes possible a different way of relating to others,
that Jesus gives us a glimpse of the world as God created it to be—
not this uncaring, walled-off, inhospitable place
where strangers are a threat and people in need are a nuisance—
a world where there is kindness, and mercy, and grace.

Next time, when you give to those who ask for something from you,
when you offer the cup of cold water, when you perform some act of kindness,
let that person know that you are doing it as a follower of Jesus,
that you are doing it because you have been loved
and now you want to show forth that love to others.
You don't have to have a speech prepared; a simple "God bless you" will do.
Remember that Christ died to show us the path to God
even when we were still separated from God.
Remember that from your baptism you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit
and marked as Christ's own for ever.
Now there's hospitality for you!

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