

## **Homily – Extend Hospitality to the Stranger**

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How many of you have stayed in an Airbnb?

Last summer I stayed in an Airbnb right next to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and as we travel this summer Jeff and I have plans to stay in two different Airbnbs.

Airbnb is an online marketplace and hospitality service, enabling people to rent lodging. Airbnb can be accessed via either the Airbnb websites or app, and there are over three million rental listings in more than 65,000 cities and towns. Airbnb competes with normal hotels, motels, and resorts by enabling people to stay in or share a home instead of a hotel room. And, as you can imagine, the traditional hospitality industry is grumpy about Airbnb.

In my experience, Airbnb has been wonderful. Each place has been clean, safe, unique and the hospitality of the owners, who you just see at the beginning when you get your key, has been friendly. After your stay you rate and comment on the host, and the host rates and comments on you as a guest. Thus, as you search for a place to stay, you look for ratings of five stars, and comments that show prior guests have also experienced good hospitality.

The word hospitality derives from the Latin *hospes*, meaning "host", "guest", or "stranger". *Hospes* is thus the root for the English word host, as well as hospitality, hospice, hostel and hotel.

Over the years, hospitality has been lifted up as a primary virtue, but curiously the word is only used three times in the Bible – all in the New Testament.

And while the word hospitality is not in today's gospel reading, the word "welcome" is there six times. Those who welcome others are rewarded. Those who offer hospitality and welcome are labeled as good people.

Hospitality joins the list of spiritual practices that will help us lead a healthy life, and here is how Renee Miller explains hospitality in her book "Strength for the Journey – A Guide to Spiritual Practices".

Miller writes, "We often think of hospitality as little more than entertaining guests – family, friends, and sometimes strangers. We share food and drink as we open up our homes to others. Sometimes we are blessed and filled by our guests, and if we are honest, sometimes we just wish they would go home." Miller says, "Offering

hospitality can be both energizing and draining, depending on our moods, the personality of the guests, and the degree of perfection we try to achieve in what we offer. At its foundation, we know that hospitality is simply welcoming others into our space and sharing the simple things of food and conversation with them. Yet, we can still make hospitality into a work of heroism to rival any fabulous dinner put on by the Queen of England. At the end of it, we are worn out and want to be left alone for a while.”

If this experience of hospitality sounds familiar to us, we may be hesitant but still the practice of hospitality and welcome is one of the best ways to knit our souls into the heart of God.

So, it's best to understand hospitality by backing into it. Take a few moments to remember when hospitality has been extended to you.

When have you felt truly welcomed?

When have you felt truly included?

When have you been so blessed by someone's hospitality that your own heart overflowed with gratitude?

We understand hospitality best by reflecting on the most profound moments of hospitality that have been offered to us. Most likely, the acts of welcome that stand out in our memories are those that were simple and genuine. They may not have any connection whatsoever with food or drink or shelter. They may simply be moments when another person unexpectedly gathered us up into their circle of friendship, or accepted us as we were, or loved us in spite of ourselves.

These experiences may be encounters with people outside our ethnicity or social circles. The welcome may be nothing more than a flight attendant noticing that we needed another bag of pretzels.

The spirituality writer, Henri Nouwen wrote about 'hospitality of heart.' At its core, hospitality is an opening of the heart. It really has very little to do with having friends or strangers over for dinner. Indeed, we can invite the poor into our homes for a meal three nights a week, but if our hearts are not open, we have not offered hospitality. This is what makes us avoid real hospitality as a practice. We hesitate to open our hearts to the degree required by hospitality. Providing a meal or shelter seems more manageable than opening our hearts.

Opening our hearts means we really have to gather others in. Their problems, their dreams, the injustices done to them, the hopes that lie hidden in their souls – all these

become a part of our own hearts when we engage in hospitality as a spiritual practice.

The challenge is that the contents of our own hearts merge with those of our guest. This means that what is in our hearts is no longer front and center. It is no longer all about me. Instead, it becomes all about us.

That internal shift can be difficult to make. It is particularly difficult when the ones we open our hearts to are completely unlike us. They may be of a different background, have a different education level, enjoy different foods, have a career that seems strange to us, wear clothes that are offensive to us, or speak, think, or act in ways that are completely other than all that we find comfortable.

It's much easier to have our favorite friends over for dinner and call it hospitality than it is to open our hearts to those who are different. It's even harder to then be asked to let the contents of their hearts merge with our own. Yet, this is exactly the invitation offered to us by the practice of hospitality and welcome. The paradox, of course, is that when we have the courage to fully open our hearts to those we love, to those who are strangers, and to those who are as different from us, we find that, in the name of God, they bless us, and our lives are never the same again.

Like other spiritual practices, hospitality needs to be done regularly and consistently. We may need to set a schedule in order to be faithful to our commitment to this practice, because it is so easy to avoid.

In order to get the full benefit of hospitality practice, it is also important to step out in places where we have never been, to meet people we have not known before, to experience arenas of life beyond our familiar terrain. In this, hospitality practice is not only about gathering other in, but also going where other are in order to open our hearts to them there."

Here at St. Barnabas we organize our many ministries into groupings and our pastoral care activities are grouped with our hospitality activities as Congregational Life ministries. Sometimes it seems odd that we lump pastoral and hospitality together, but I hope you can now see how linked the two are to one another.

And, today, I want to end with a story, which at first glance doesn't seem to be a perfect fit with this spiritual practice of hospitality. But, I will get us there.

Nine years ago, after church Jeff and I jumped into the car and drove fourteen hours to northeastern Oregon. At 3:30 in the night, we pulled to the side of the road in John Day, Oregon and parked next to about twenty other cars that were also parked for the

night. With our last minute trip, there were certainly no hotel rooms or Airbnb's available, so we reclined our seats and went to sleep in the car. And three hours later we awoke to daylight, and started meeting the people in the cars around us. Another dozen cars joined us on the side of the road so that by the time the eclipse was starting in a cloudless sky, we had about seventy-five people in this pull off area on the side of the road.

Folks had driven from all over the west coast into the zone of totality to experience a full eclipse of the sun. Jeff and I had driven the second farthest, for there was a carload from San Diego. The carload on one side of us was a family from Santa Cruz and on the other side was a couple from Walnut Creek in the East Bay.

The total eclipse was amazing. As the moon came fully in front of the sun, the air temperature dropped quickly. The frogs started croaking and the crickets started chirping. This is something they do not do during a normal day. As the totality was achieved it became twilight in an instant and the stars came out. And, instead of having a beautiful sun set in one portion of the sky, there was a sunset in a three hundred and sixty-degree circle around us. The full eclipse in the zone of totality in this part of northeastern Oregon lasted two minutes and then it was gone. I highly recommend you have this life experience.

But here is the hospitality part of the eclipse. I mentioned earlier that we met the people around us when we awoke. It was amazing to have instant community with people of all shapes and sizes. There was a sense of openness and connection in a way that rarely happens. People shared food and drink and telescopes and science projects. Jeff had extra eclipse glasses and shared them with a family from Canada. We had a fascinating conversation with an immigrant from Venezuela, and we talked about how the economy and society are disintegrating in that nation.

If hospitality is really about opening our hearts to others, then this is the unexpected thing that happened to us that day. I will treasure the eclipse, but even more so, I will treasure the memory of hearts that were opened up on a roadside pullout in northeastern Oregon.

And, then there is the World Cup. I get the sense that there is some amazing hospitality and welcome that is happening with the World Cup. Last week, in one instance the Algerian World Cup team had been practicing in Lawrence, Kansas, and that college town has welcomed the team by having Algerian flags all around the town. And, the University of Kansas marching band learned and played the Algerian national anthem for the team as a sign of welcome and hospitality. Even if you don't care to watch soccer, take some time to watch some of the stories of the instant sense of community and welcome that have been springing up as the world comes together

to watch twenty-two men kick a ball around a pitch. And when you see that hospitality, pull it into your heart as a memory, so that the next time the occasion arises you too can open your heart to the beloved of God who are already around you.