

“Hospitality.” It seems like such an old fashioned word. As a matter of fact, the word “hospitality” is old. Its roots can be found in the Latin language. In Latin, “hospitality” means both “guest” and “host.” As such, it has a sense of mutuality to it.

The word “hospitality” is also somewhat related to the word “hostile.” In Jesus’ day, every person from the Mediterranean region was expected to be hospitable. That meant offering hospitality to those who were strangers, even folks one might be suspicious of. They could potentially be hostile. But reaching out to them in kindness eclipses the potential of anything bad which could happen.

“Hospitality” is the theme of today’s first reading from the Second Book of Kings. In that book, an unnamed woman offers Elisha the prophet a place to stay. She makes it comfortable for him. She offers him generous and loving hospitality. There is also a reciprocal aspect to this hospitality. For her kindness, Elisha intercedes before God for the woman because she has never been able to bear a son. And God hears Elisha’s prayer. A year later, she is cradling a baby boy in her arms.

The theme of hospitality is also found in the second part of the gospel we heard today. In that gospel passage, Jesus uses the famous phrase, “whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...will surely not lose his reward.” To give a cup of cold water to another meant going to a deep well or a spring, usually far from someone’s house. But that act of

hospitality / kindness is rewarded by God, in this life and the life to come. We don't give to receive. But we are usually blessed abundantly in the act of giving.

As you might imagine, the word "hospitality" is connected to the word "hospital." If you've ever spent time in the hospital, you would normally expect care when you can't care for yourself; compassion from those who are helping you; healing; wholeness; and respect in a moment where you are most vulnerable.

That kind of care is what Jesus is talking about. It is also reflected in the hospitable generosity that the barren woman extended to the prophet Elisha in the first reading.

I have been the beneficiary of hospitality on numerous occasions. I trust you have too. When I was doing graduate work in Minnesota, I was unable to travel home for the Thanksgiving holidays. But I fondly recall being invited to a classmate's home where I was made to feel like a member of the family. That friend and classmate was truly hospitable. When I visit with my brothers who live out of state or vacation with friends, I am treated with utmost hospitality. I am often told that their home is my home. While I don't feel like my response is exactly reciprocal to the measure they have given to me, I do hold them dear to my heart, help them when and however I can, and certainly pray for them every day.

Those interactions reflect the presence of Christ among us. And they remind us and demand of us, that we share the very presence of Christ to others.

When we think of hospitality, we usually see it on the level of the personal. Today's readings, however, demand that we move beyond the personal when thinking about and executing hospitality. Jesus in the gospel and the hospitable woman in the first reading went beyond the personal. The hospitality they showed, and call us to reflect, extended beyond family and what is familiar, to something much broader and much more inclusive. As children of God our mission always needs to extend beyond self. That is a core principle of our faith. Our hospitality must also expand beyond ourselves as well. We must show hospitality to the community around us, not just to family, friends, and those who are like us. Our government and its leaders, if they hope to reflect Christ, must show hospitality, not just to their citizens but to those outside our borders. For the Christian, true and biblical hospitality extends to all groups, religions, cultures, and nations. Christ-like hospitality even applies to those with whom we disagree or don't see eye-to-eye. This kind of hospitality and the multiple ways it is lived out are not mere suggestions. They are commands. And they are stepping stones which lead us to a deeper relationship with Christ and a share in the Kingdom of God.

Note, also, that Jesus offers us sincere and generous hospitality when we come to Mass. He initially shows hospitality with words of forgiveness. He does not hold our sins against us. He simply asks us to humbly and contritely confess those sins to him. With that, he offers unconditional welcome.

Then, Jesus feeds us. He does so by generously giving us his own Body and Blood, the gift of his very self. Being God, he

could be content just hanging out in heaven. But he comes to us. Again and again and again. He sacrificially and sacramentally comes to us often. He knows our inner hunger. Our wants. Our worries. Our desires. And he comes to us. To sustain us. Nourish us. And to comfort us.

What Christ so freely gives to us, he commands that we share the same with others.

In years past, some surveys indicated that Catholic parishes have not always been hospitable. From my time with you these past four years however, I hold that Our Lady of Lourdes Parish is the exception. We are a welcoming community. But we can never be satisfied or complacent that we have done enough in that regard. So, as I conclude this homily, I'd like you to do this. Stand up. Turn to someone near you. Tell them who you are. Ask them who they are. Tell them you are glad we can pray together. Tell them something about yourself. Show them that God's life-giving hospitality begins here with this conversation. (Pause and then ask the congregation to be seated.)

Let us pray that we will continue to extend God's gift of hospitality to others as we leave this place. And may we continue to hold dear to our hearts God's command that whatever we do for our sisters or brothers, even if its something as simple as giving a cup of cold water to another, we do it for Christ. As we do for Christ, so Christ does for us.

Amen? Amen!