

5 Pentecost, Proper 6, Year A
15 June 2008; Fathers' Day
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Spiritual Hospitality

There's a Zen story about a professor, a heady, academic type, who desired to learn the ways of Zen, so he visited a Zen master. From the moment the Zen master greeted the professor at the door, the professor did nothing but talk: about himself, his studies, his interest in Zen. After about a half an hour, the Zen master began to grow impatient with the man. He quietly walked into the kitchen, prepared some tea and brought it into the room where they were sitting. He placed a tea bowl in front of the talking professor and began to pour. After the bowl was full, the Zen master kept pouring, tea overflowed onto the table.

"It is over full!" he exclaimed. "No more will go in!" the Zen Master responded, "Like this bowl, you are also over full. You are full of your opinions and speculations, your own thoughts and desires. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your bowl?"

How many of us have ever met someone like that? Someone just so full of themselves, their lives, their dramas, their thoughts, that they just seem too full to receive anything else?

Maybe all of us, at one point or another have been like that too. I know I can find my self "too full" to receive anything else from time to time. Perhaps some of you are with me in that boat; too full of our own problems, our own pride, our own celebrations, our own ideas, thoughts, fears, or preoccupations that we have a hard time receiving anything else.

Ok – so sometimes our bowls are too full. That's not news to some of us. "*So what do we do about it?!?!*" Sometimes to empty our bowl a little bit, for a time, enough to be open to another – to God, it's as simple as realizing what's going on and asking for the grace to be open.

Dear God, my bowl is so full, take some of this "stuff" for me please, so that I may be open to others and to you. It's not a magic bullet, but it helps.

Sometimes it helps to look at our biblical story for inspiration. Last week, we read about the story of God calling Abram and Sarai, who would later be renamed as the more familiar Abraham and Sarah. God called them from the place of the known, the comfortable, to journey to a land that God would show them. And they showed incredible openness to the call of God.

This week, we read of the three messengers showing up at the tent of Abraham. Three strangers appeared at Abraham's tent. He met them with gracious hospitality, welcomed them to stay, and had a rich meal prepared for them.

But not only did Abraham show cultural hospitality to his guests by welcoming them into his tent and feeding them well, he also showed what I like to think of as spiritual hospitality. He welcomed the messengers, not only into his dwelling, but he received their presence in his life. He was hospitable, not only physically, but spiritually as well, by welcoming their presence and their message.

As people of God, we are called to hospitality. It's not just a biblical virtue, but a biblical imperative. As a response to the hospitality God shows us in creation, we are called to live out an ethic of hospitality as well. It's not just recommended, it's required.

Hospitality can take many different forms. I'm sure we all know people with a clear gift of hospitality, in a classic sense, those who can create a beautiful atmosphere, who can anticipate the needs of their guests, who make people feel genuinely comfortable.

There's something wonderful about showing that kind of hospitality (regardless of how "good" we think we are at it), and there's something beautiful about receiving that kind of hospitality as well. We don't do that so much in our culture today.

How many of us would have done the same thing Abraham did if three strangers showed up at our front door? I know I don't really do that. The folks who show up unannounced to my door usually want me to sign a petition or convert to their religion. I normally don't invite them in. I certainly have never rushed into the kitchen; prepared the best meal I could and begged them to stay.

I think in this day and age, there are exceptions, but I think that most people reserve showing hospitality in their home to people they already know. Although, I have to interject here, that it's one of the most effective ways of building community. There are so many people who have said that it was a personal invitation from a parishioner to share a meal with them that encouraged newcomers in the church to feel more connected to the community and keep coming back.

Showing hospitality opening our homes to others and sharing a meal with others is a cornerstone of biblical hospitality and has been part of our tradition since the beginning.

And there are other ways of being hospitable as well. Hospitality is about receiving another with goodwill and about generosity. We can show that kind of hospitality anywhere we are. Spiritual hospitality is a posture of the soul. It's making sure we approach new people, new ideas, new situations, change, with an attitude of openness and generosity. Spiritual hospitality is when our bowls are empty enough to receive something new.

And that posture of spiritual hospitality, that openness, that generosity and good will, makes it easy for people to be in our presence. It helps others to feel welcome in our midst. And it allows us to receive that which is being offered.

The thirteenth chapter of the book of Hebrews says, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Of course many of us think of the Abraham story when we hear this passage, but angels (which is the same word as messenger in Hebrew) can come in all different forms. Not just in the person we welcome in our homes, but God’s messengers, of course, can be everywhere.

What would it look like if we approached our day with spiritual hospitality? What would our interactions look like with the clerk at Wegman’s? With our co-workers? And perhaps, if we practice and become really advanced, what would spiritual bowl-open-generous-full-of-good-will hospitality sound like to the telemarketer who calls during dinner?

Or how about closer to home? Do we approach our family members with our bowls empty? (Sometimes their the ones we are the most “full of ourselves” with!) What would it look like?

True hospitality, like any spiritual practice, takes just that – practice. We try. Sometimes we get it right, and that experience becomes part of our being. Sometimes, we get it wrong, and hope that we can learn from that.

We’re not expected to be perfect, but God calls us to be open. We’re not called to be spineless wimps or martyrs, but we are called to be open and hospitable to one another, just as Abraham showed hospitality to the strangers at his tent.

May we have the grace to empty our bowls and show spiritual hospitality to the people in our midst; we may just be entertaining angles, or messengers unawares.