

## The Unexpected Guest

Today's readings ask us to sit with probably the most difficult part of being a Christian, because today's readings are all about hospitality.

There's no question that hospitality, given to those we know or are related to or to those from whom we want something — that kind of hospitality comes quite easily.

But that is not the hospitality of Christ.

Everywhere we look, people who are similar to each other, whether by class or color or ethnicity, usually find it quite easy to be kind and welcoming to each other.

Whether it's a Trump rally or a Biden rally, likes are liked by likes.

But the radical, even revolutionary call of Jesus, is that we extend our "comfort zone" hospitality to everyone; particularly to those who are not like us, to those who cannot return the favor, to those who are at the bottom of the social ladder, those whom most respectable people, truth be told, despise.

We begin today with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The common belief is that the people there were destroyed because they were sexually promiscuous; but in fact, their true sin, according to the scholars, was the sin of no hospitality.

Last week, in the reading from Genesis, three men show up at Abraham's home and everyone rushes to make a feast for these unexpected guests; it is hospitality on a grand scale.

The veal is tender, the bread is fresh and everyone is stuffed to the gills!

That's last week.

This week, our same three guests make their way to Sodom and Gomorrah – and what greets them is anything but hospitality!

You see, Abraham's three guests are mugged by people whose idea of The Welcome Wagon is to gang rape all visitors!

Not words you usually hear in church I know, but that's the nightmare that takes us into today's reading, as Abraham dickers with God over the fate of thousands, negotiating for their survival if only 50 or 30 or 10 hospitable people can be found.

Alas, even 10 can't be found and the city is wiped out.

When we kill hospitality, we kill who we are....

These are not theoretical discussions for us here at St Elizabeth's.

Unlike many churches, we are not locked up like a museum 6 days a week.

And so many of you are involved in one way or another with the least, the lost and the left behind, thanks be to God.

As you have no doubt seen, the city has acted aggressively to remove the houseless from Kanoa Lane, who, during my absence on vacation, moved from the back of the church to the front, putting before all of us these questions:

What is Christ asking of us as these fellow human beings sleep on concrete sidewalks just outside of our doors?

What might be a more helpful way to encourage folks to deal with addiction and mental illness?

What does the mere presence of these houseless say to a society that worships money and things while so many indigenous people are completely destitute?

The vestry and I welcome your insights, your prayers, your ideas; as we ask, what does hospitality look like in the circumstances that are before us today?

Hospitality is also at the root of our Hawaiian brothers and sisters struggle over the sacred place of Mauna Kea.

The hospitality of the Hawaiian people over the centuries cannot be overstated.

As Big Island Mayor Harry Kim said just the other day to the protectors gathered at Mauna Kea:

“For the first time in my 80 years of life, I see a group of people finally coming together to feel proud of being who you are, because you are the most beautiful, warmest, giving-est people on God’s earth.”

And then there was that beautiful scene with the governor, who is no fan of this protest, exchanging the ha, the breath, with the protectors; these protectors who embody the majestic vision of loving one’s enemy, of being kind to the one who insults you.

And yet, Hawaiian hospitality is often abused and misused, trampled upon and taken advantage of.

Are the Hawaiian people, at long last, saying, enough?

Hospitality is also at the very heart of the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer that begins with recognizing that God is not some distant and distracted deity, but Our Father, who lives not far away, but in heaven, which, because of Jesus, is right next door!

We know heaven is close because Jesus keeps reminding us that the Kingdom of God is near, it is among you, it is within you....because the finger of this hospitable God is even now touching and softening hearts....

In Jesus, heaven and earth intersect.

In Jesus, the earth is being restored to what it was always intended to be – the sign of God's great love pouring itself out in the never-ending miracle of creation.

Through the hospitality of God, everything exists!

And so, after recognizing God's sovereignty over this world, Jesus moves directly to our real human needs: feed us, forgive us, protect us...

In other words, "Be hospitable to us!"

We ask for God's hospitality so that we too may be hospitable to others, not just to those from our own clan or tribe or country, but especially to the stranger, to the weird, the outcast.

That kind of hospitality allows us to glimpse the truth of our situation: that we are not alone in this world.

That our fate doesn't depend on our ability to save ourselves.

That our solutions are not in walls or guns or making our country great again, but in letting go of all those things.

By dying to our best thinking.

By forgiving debts that are justly owed to us.

For it is then that we find ourselves safely in the embrace of the God of hospitality, no matter what happens.

Jesus invites all of us to recognize that our best thinking creates the very problems we now face.

That the only way to peace and justice is to become who we are — people who have died in Christ — people who, because we are dead, can experience the great and glorious gift of resurrection.

That's what Paul is telling the Colossians this morning:

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition...." because if our faith is only about rituals and looking good, we've missed Jesus!

"For in Jesus dwells the whole fullness of the deity, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority...." because in Jesus, the crucified one, we see the very face of God.

Reminding us that our task isn't to admire, but to follow him, especially in his embrace of the least, the lost and the left behind.

"In him ... you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ..." so that just as physical circumcision cuts away the foreskin, spiritual circumcision cuts away our best thinking, leaving us to rely on the foolish message of the cross: that in giving we receive, in forgiving we are forgiven, that only in dying do we find real life.

That's the point of the sleeping neighbor and his insistent friend in today's gospel.

It's not a story about buttering up God with praise or proving we deserve his compassion.

The sleeping neighbor, (who represents God in this story), climbs out of bed because of the **shameless pounding on his door!**

Respectable people don't pound on doors at midnight.

Respectable people don't recognize that they are in fact... dead.

But we Christians, because of our baptism, we know we are already dead!

We know God is only interested in our shameless recognition that we are in fact dead – and that it is my death, not my good looks or good deeds, but dying to MY WAY OF DOING THINGS – this is what enables us to be raised from the dead, and enter into the hospitality of God. R. Capon, paraphrased.

The greatest threat to hospitality is fear.

And death is the best remedy for fear!

Because if I'm already dead, what's there to be afraid of?

If I'm already dead, I don't need to worry about this immigrant taking my job, or buying that gun to defend myself, or looking to get into another war to protect our way of life.

Which is why we need reminding that Christianity, properly understood, is not a religion.

Religion is humanity seeking God, trying to pacify God, trying to do the right thing for God, as we hold tight to our right to run the show on this side of the grave.

Religion is about hospitality, but only to those who are like me.

But Christianity is about God seeking us.

Finding us.

Dying for us.

And then inviting us into that death so that we, like Jesus, may also rise again.

Not only when we close our eyes for the last time; but today, in the midst of the abundant creation that God calls into existence every second of every day.

Giving us the courage and the capacity to extend loving hospitality to everyone we meet.

To everyone in need.

Just as God extends loving hospitality to all of her good creation.

Even to me.

Even to you.

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