

Grace of God is Found in Hospitality

Have you ever been caught outside in a storm unable to find shelter?

Glenn and I were hiking in Scotland, walking up the River Spey. The day started out well, dry, slightly cool with occasional sunny spots. Really good for hiking. Late in the morning dark clouds rolled in. We needed to keep moving towards our destination. The winds picked up, and then it started to pour with rain. We were soaked before we could get our rain gear on. We ran to take shelter under some big trees. This was in the days before cell phones and Google to check the weather. I suspect that many parts of the trail are remote enough that they would not have cell phone coverage even today.

Then we heard a voice through the rain, “Come here. Take shelter.” A woman was calling from the door of her house. “Don’t stand there in the rain getting wet. Come inside.”

We had not even noticed the house a short distance away. We looked at each other and then dashed up the pathway.

A few minutes later, our rain gear was hanging, dripping onto the floor of the porch, our boots placed near the woodstove, and we sat at her kitchen table with hands around mugs of hot tea.

She welcomed us into her home, and her hospitality was much appreciated.

A hot cup of tea in a rainstorm or a cold glass of water in the summer heat. Small gestures with profound meaning.

In our short reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is telling the disciples that whoever welcomes them, welcomes Jesus, and whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes God.

It has echoes of the parable of the sheep and the goats, and Jesus saying that whoever feeds the hungry, gives water to the thirsty, clothes the naked, welcomes the stranger or visits the imprisoned does it also to God.

Jesus has just given the twelve disciples some instructions as they go out to be healers, preachers and prophets, to share the good news.

Take no money or bag or spare tunic. Accept the hospitality of the first home that offers, eat what you are given.

Jesus is sending them into the midst of wolves, so be as wise as serpents. They will be handed over to governors, and brother will betray brother.

And ends by saying, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

These are pretty stark warnings. Some people will reject both the message and the messenger.

As Jesus finally sends the disciples on their way, he adds, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

When we hear stories of hospitality, the focus is typically on the guests and the hosts. Guests receive gifts of provision, care, and shelter on their journeys. Hosts typically experience the blessing of doing good.

If you are anything like me, however, you might rarely think about what this same hospitality means to God. The act of sheltering others pleases God.

Hospitality reveals those luminous threads between all things. It highlights the relationships between various parts of the created order. Welcoming is, in a deeply spiritual way, sacramental — the act itself makes invisible things visible. A sacrament is an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. A smile, an acknowledgement, a glass of water, a cup of tea are a visible sign of the invisible welcome and hospitality.

This is not just about welcoming someone famous, a religious celebrity like Jesus, a prophet, or one of the righteous. Hospitality holds such sacred power that even if you give a cup of water to a child in the name of any disciple (presumably including yourself), you have honoured God and will be honoured by the divine.

In Jesus day, children were a blessing and were also the property of their fathers until they were adults. This was a social status that was common across many cultures including the colonizing Romans. They were on the lowest rungs of the society, along with women, peasants, aliens and the enslaved.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus elevated those of lesser status to positions of honour. In his Kingdom much is inverted compared to ours — *the first shall be last and the last first*. And thus, it is telling that he adds children to the list of those to be welcomed, right there with Jesus, the prophets, and the righteous.

Every guest, from every class or race, social position reflects God's image, so welcome should be extended to everyone from the top of the social order to the bottom, not just to those that we deem deserving. Every act of hospitality is an act of welcoming the sacred presence.

That cup of water to a child is, of course, a refreshing and restoring drink. It is a great kindness. But, if you gaze just a little longer, you might see that it is also a portal that opens to the holy.

While Jesus had just warned the disciples that what they are to teach will set man against father, and daughter against mother. The words that follow, that we read today, ask us to welcome and be welcomed.

And in that simple act of hospitality, we find our own humanity and the reflection of God. It seems that even swords, estrangement, and fears of our own inferiority can be healed when we reach out with cups of water in hand.

And that's where God shows up. Right there. You can touch the holy when you reach out to others — the poor, the rejected, immigrants and strangers, the unwanted, the fearful. If you want to know God, give a cup of water to a child. Or to an asylum seeker.

Hostility is overcome by hospitality. The open hand opens closed eyes, hearts, and doors.

Thanks be to God for a cup of cool water and a mug of hot tea. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 10:40-42