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St. Paul's, Fairfield
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Hospitality

There is a method of bible study that involves understanding the story from the perspective of each of the characters. To get into the story, you take on the role of the person you most identify with. Today's gospel especially lends itself to this kind of approach.

The story is so detailed; it's easy to put yourself in the picture. Can't you just imagine the scene? There is a swarm of people inside and around the house trying to get close to Jesus, to avail themselves of his teaching and healing.

Mark draws our attention to one particular group of people: four friends carrying another, who is paralyzed, on a cot. They don't have a prayer of getting close to Jesus. So in desperation they carry the friend to the roof, cut a hole in it, and lower him down to Jesus' presence.

Imagine Jesus hearing the scraping, pounding noises coming from the ceiling. Then dust and chunks of clay and mud fall on them. Do they think it's an earthquake? Or that the house is collapsing?

We don't know those details, but we do know that the man himself encountered a presence so powerfully healing that he was freed not just from his physical paralysis, but he was also freed from whatever crippled him inside.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you the one in need of the help of friends? Are you one of the friends who would do anything to help get your friend to the Healer? Or are you all of them?

This story has many layers of meaning. The one part I want to focus on is this: The gospel makes it clear that **we need each other**.

Children know this instinctively; when they fall and scrape a knee, what do they do? They run to someone who cares about them who can kiss it and make it better.

We lose this spontaneous ability to reach out to others as we get older and develop a sense that we are to be independent and self-sufficient. We are often taught that it's important to keep problems to ourselves and not to "air our dirty laundry with others" or not to "bother" others with our own problems.

These lessons, so ingrained in the New England persona, are entirely contradictory to the way of Jesus as we see it in the gospels. The essence of life together in Christ is that everything we do---our worship, our education, our fellowship, our service---all depend on and revolve around our caring for one another.

One of the most significant ways we care for another is in our **hospitality**. Now, growing up as a Southerner, I got lots of instruction in hospitality. It included things like how to set a nice table, how to make small talk, which side to serve from, and how to fold the hand towels. There was a right way to do everything.

I've been thinking a lot about hospitality lately, maybe because I just spent a week sorting through my mother's things, and it means something very different to me now. I realized that there is entertaining, and there is hospitality.

Entertaining without the spiritual dimension of hospitality can be a kind of bondage. You have to get things just right, you have to please, you have to---most of all---make a good impression. "What will they think?" is the question you ask.

But hospitality is something quite different. The question there is, "How can I serve?" That's what hospitality really is---making space in your home and in your heart for another.

Our God is a God of hospitality: gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, providing for the needs of all with great tenderness. We are called to show this hospitality in the ways we welcome one another, especially the stranger.

To welcome as Christ welcomed requires that we let go of our pre-judgments, our prejudices and that we honor one another. One simple way to become aware of our unconscious prejudices is to imagine a festive meal to which you are invited. The table is set for many guests. Whom would you not want to sit down with and share this meal?

Would you rather not sit next to someone who *looks* different? Does the biker covered in tattoos or the punk with purple hair and nose rings fill the bill as one you'd rather not share your meal with? What about an Arab or a young black man with baggy pants and gold knuckle rings? Or a homeless woman who hasn't had a bath in weeks?

Whom would you rather *not* sit with?

We may not be asked specifically to act in these situations; but we **are** challenged to leave our own comfort zones to appreciate the uniqueness of each person's life. This kind of welcoming is indeed a radical concept, and it got Jesus in a lot of trouble.

Hospitality isn't simply being nice to strangers. Too often when we think of hospitality and welcoming, we get an image of the kind we learn from Martha Stewart or Good Housekeeping, the kind I learned growing up in the South.

Christian hospitality isn't about which fork to use or how to make small talk with a stranger. Real Christian hospitality is an act of justice. It is about opening ourselves to relationship and finding the Holy in all people.

St. Benedict says that the people we encounter each day, at the grocery store or the gas station, are not incidental to our lives. He teaches that if we close ourselves off to the

stranger, we close our selves off to the Sacred. In the Benedictine way of life, every human is sacred and every life is holy ground.

What would happen if we were to see hospitality less as a polite option and more as the way that Jesus invites Christian people and Christian communities to live in the world?

Christian hospitality is hospitality of the heart: an invitation into relationship. It is not grand gestures, but open and vulnerable hearts. Not just with those we know. Not just with those who live in our neighborhoods. Not just with those who look like us and talk like us. That is what we are about here at St. Paul's when we proclaim in our publications that we are open, vital and committed.

We live out God's hospitality whenever we welcome another, whenever we look beyond the familiar faces and open ourselves to new faces and new stories. We live out God's hospitality whenever we move beyond our self-imposed limitations to recognize the face of God in those in our larger neighborhood whom we call "strangers."

In a few moments, we will gather around the table to share in the holy meal. All of us will eat and drink at the invitation of our host Jesus Christ, who excludes no one. And then pray God we will go out from here to share the same hospitality and respect with all whom we meet. Amen