

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Forgive me if you've already heard the story of my mother's use of child labor whenever it was her turn to host her sewing club or bridge club at our house. My sister Cathy and I would run for our rooms as Mama went into a cleaning frenzy, only to be called out to do everything from washing windows and woodwork and even the screens on the porch to polishing the furniture and the silver, something Mama had a lot of. For several weeks in advance of the occasion, it felt like nothing else mattered in our household except that company was coming and everything had to be perfect.

Once Cathy and I were sent to our rooms for arguing and told we had to stay there until we could get along. We made a pact to stay put until Mama had finished the work she wanted us to do. We didn't enjoy the preparation—not one bit—but we did love how it all came together on the day. The table would be beautifully set for luncheon, the food was delicious, and the house practically sparkled. For the longest time, that was how I defined hospitality: preparation for perfection. I was wrong! I know our mother wanted everything to be just right for her friends, but they weren't coming to inspect and judge! They were coming to enjoy time with their friends.

The definition of hospitality, particularly *Christian* hospitality, is not found in the “work” of it, neither in the preparation nor in the perfection. Christian hospitality is defined and assessed by its effect on those who receive it as well as those who offer it. The feeding of the five thousand in John's Gospel today is about much more than a miracle; it's about radical hospitality—that is, hospitality that is different from what is usual or traditional, far more than the generous and friendly welcoming of guests and visitors. Jesus finds himself in the role of the host, with no choice in his own mind other than to offer hospitality to those who have come to him. He offers them hospitality, not as a response to their need or their demand, or even their expectation, but from sheer grace and generosity, making use of what is available. Jesus is not concerned about throwing a good party, or making a good impression on his guests, and there is no mention of their hunger. Jesus doesn't feed the crowd because they're hungry, he feeds them simply because they are there and they are his guests.

In an essay called “Hospitality to the Stranger,” Maria Russell Kenney tells the story of the relationship she and her husband share with a man named John who one day appeared in the midst of their church community. John is well-educated, friendly, gentle, and articulate in an unusual accent because he is the American-born son of parents who emigrated from Ghana. John is also a schizophrenic. In one moment he's warm and pleasant; in the next he makes eccentric requests and accuses those around him of stealing from him.

The people in the church warmed to John, but they didn't really know how to respond to him, especially when he appeared and disappeared from their lives on a regular basis. After one of these episodes, he *stayed* gone and his church friends worried and began to search for him. One day Maria's husband Billy found him almost outside their door. He was living in the basement of a nearby college chapel and stayed there for several months, joining Maria and Billy and their community on Sunday nights and occasionally attending small group meetings. Just as things began to seem somewhat normal, John showed up one evening with everything he owned in his backpack. He had moved out of the chapel, and had nowhere to live. He refused to go to the homeless shelter and the people in his church community began to worry about what to do. They let him sleep in the church during the day so he could stay awake all night in the city parks, but they all knew it wasn't a long-term solution and worried about what would happen next.

Maria says that she and her husband, Billy, were “tormented” by their worry. They began to ask themselves whether they should take John into their home. They considered the negatives: he

smelled bad, he was paranoid, he hoarded things. The list went on; but for each negative they recognized an available solution. And it wasn't just guilt that tormented them. It was the realization that they considered John their friend and they would be devastated if anything happened to him. During an unusually heavy summer storm, they wondered if John was dry and safe and comfortable. Billy announced that he couldn't take it anymore and that tomorrow he would go to get John. Maria agreed. They knew they couldn't shelter every homeless person in their city, but they *could* help John...

The arrangement was difficult at first. John camped out in their dining room until Billy and Maria convinced him he would be more comfortable and have more privacy in their guest room. They talked with him about the rhythms of their household, about showers, laundry, meals together. Maria and Billy obviously had to make some adjustments to their own young-married lifestyle, like being sure they were dressed when they walked around the house.

As they were working through these adjustments, they encountered their first crisis: they had to leave on a previously scheduled trip and couldn't find any place for John to stay during their absence. They were consumed with worry about what would happen to John—and to their house—if they left him there while they were gone, but they couldn't bear the thought of turning him back out into the streets, so they decided to let him stay. They made arrangements for friends to check on him, stocked the refrigerator, prayed, and left things in God's hands. The people who checked on John were changed as they came to know him and provided for his needs. When Billy and Maria returned, all was well.

Through the first year of this living arrangement, John and this young couple who had taken him in learned to live together in their common life, marked by both the cycles of John's mental illness and the joy of the experiences they shared with him. Maria and Billy liked living with John, but they were always aware of an unspoken question. "What exactly is the plan for John?" At the beginning of their time together there had been an assumption that John would get cleaned up, get on medication, get a job and get an apartment—moving toward the American ideal of self-sufficiency. Was that what was best for John? They reframed the question to ask, "What is God's plan for John and what role are we to play in it?" Discerning the answer to that question led to another: "Can we continue to live as we have for the past year?"

Through prayer and faith, they decided they could. Shortly after they made that decision, John decided to seek psychiatric care and began taking medication. Though that helped, John still needed their care and assistance, but their lives began to resemble a family living together. Maria and Billy's home is also John's home, and they all expect it to remain just that. Maria and Billy look forward to the time that they will have children, thinking of how their children will love and care for John and how John will love and care for their children.

At the end of her essay, Maria writes "as our home has gradually become his home as well, it has been wonderful to see John begin to move from 'guest' to 'host,' from recipient of hospitality to practitioner of it." Of course that's what this story is about: radical hospitality, practiced in a way that few of us can imagine ourselves being part of.

Earlier I commented that the definition of Christian hospitality is found in its effect on those who receive it as well as those who offer it. That means, of course, that the test of our hospitality is not in its presentation, but in the results it brings, results that most effectively mean change for both the givers and the receivers. In our church life, and hopefully in our personal lives as well, effective hospitality is blind, giving no notice to what the recipient looks like or stands for or brings with him. When we are blind in this way, we become vulnerable, open to be changed by those who come to us, just as they are vulnerable when they approach us. And it's not just about saying hello, or welcoming someone to our church, or exchanging the peace with them. It's about an invitation to be transformed: we believe you will change our lives, and that we will change yours as well. Wow! Won't the spirit have a field day with that!

“Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.” Jesus knows what he is going to do with us, too, and if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, radically hospitable, and open to the transformation that accompanies true hospitality, we might just find ourselves in a situation as miraculous as the feeding of the five thousand. Wouldn’t that be something! *Amen.*