

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good. Overcome that which tears us apart, that which divides, that which seeks to destroy, with good, with community, with service, with our radical ability to move through the evil of this world in our commitment to showing mutual affection, to outdo in showing honor, to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, to contribute to the needs of the saints, to extend hospitality to strangers. Our call as followers of Christ, our call as Christians, our call as Episcopalians, our call as members (and visitors) of St. John's Cathedral, is to overcome evil with good. When Paul writes to the Church in Rome, we get a sense that our sense of mission, our sense of understanding the family that is the community of believers, is centered upon how we invite, welcome, and include (truly, radically include) others into our lives. And, that this sense, this call, is about our lives here in this Church, but also at home with our families, our friends, those who are closest to us and those who we simply interact with, and additionally about how we invite, welcome, and include, how we treat the stranger among us.

It is easy (or at least it should be) to invite, welcome, include our closest family and friends. It's a bit harder but still doable to do this with those whom we encounter on a regular basis. It can be quite hard to invite, welcome, include the stranger. This makes Church an interesting challenge. For it is in Church that our families are present. It is in Church that we (hopefully) find close friendships. It is in Church that we encounter the same people week-in and week-out. But, it is also in Church that we meet the stranger, and it is in how we treat the stranger that we ultimately will be judged. It is in how we practice

our call to radical Christian hospitality, a radical inviting, welcoming, including, that we begin to see if we are loving one another with mutual affection, if we are contributing to the needs of the saints, extending our hospitality to strangers.

Our call to Christian hospitality is not simply an open door, a sign outside, or even a friendly face that greets you as you come in the door, it requires more of us, it expects more of us. And it challenges us to know how we can fully live into this mission, this understanding of faith, when it can be really hard to do.

We often get folks who are in need that come into the Welcome Center during the week, seeking something. Two such instances stood out to me this past week as I reflected on the lessons for today. The first was a man who came in, seeking \$15. It's for gas, he said. I just need to get home, he said. And, I turned him away. It never gets easy to turn someone away. I believe (with some very specific exceptions) every story that is shared with me when people come in seeking help. I am sure that all he needs is \$15 for gas. But, that is not a service that we provide, something that sits with me every time I turn someone away, every time I hear a lesson like today.

The second instance was a young couple, in rough shape, who I assumed were going to ask for cash for this thing or the other but surprised when they simply asked, do you have any food we can have, do you happen to have an extra blanket you can give us. This I could help with. I gave them food, or at least what little I could scrounge up in finding our normal sources depleted that day. I gave them a blanket that the youth had prepared as part of a service project. And they were grateful. They asked if it was all right if they just sat inside for a few minutes while they ate the granola bars, chips, and apples I had found. I did

the bare minimum for them, and they were so grateful to have someone provide that for them.

So, why help one and not the other? What of our Christian call to extending hospitality to the stranger, to love one another, is seen in either (both?) of these instances? In the first instance, we simply don't have cash lying around to hand out in the office, and what cash we do have is held for real emergency situations. But for me the real question is: even if we had the money, would that be hospitality, would that be service? I think the answer is found somewhere in the reaction of the person who we turned away, a reaction that has been seen many times over by others seeking cash. Anger, entitlement to be served, condemnation of the perceived vast wealth of this space, condemnation of perceived wealth of clergy.

There are agencies in town that offer travel assistance, but when those places are suggested the response is usually dismissive of those places for one reason or another. It makes me wonder where the \$15 will actually end up, even if you do need to get home, that \$15 could buy something more fun. I think it is part of our hospitality to not bankrupt ourselves by handing out \$15, \$20, \$50 to every person that comes in seeking cash. It is also part of our hospitality to go out of our way to provide help when it is within our power to do so. Food is plentiful here. I am not taking food out of anyone's mouths by giving food to those who come in hungry. Blankets are available here, and it will be used and cherished by those who have little, have nothing, else.

In providing food, in providing a blanket, I provided hospitality by allowing this young couple to cling to hope. I provided hospitality by showing care, concern, love for this

young couple. I wish I could've provided a little bit more, but they were still so grateful for the little I was able to offer. I rarely see a random stranger seeking cash satisfied with any other offers for assistance, be satisfied with the care and concern shown by trying to send them towards places that can help. It's not that they don't also deserve mutual affection, perseverance of prayer, of hospitality, but sometimes the hospitality that is needed and available is not the version of hospitality that is sought out.

Our call to hospitality is amplified in the gospel lesson today by Christ. Jesus tells Peter and the disciples (after a strong rebuke of Peter, of course), "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

Our call to hospitality, our call to a life lived in and through Christ, taking the lessons that have been left for us by Christ, by the apostles, by the history and tradition of the church and our ability to discern how these lessons impact us today, here and now, is not about becoming comfortable in place, in a place. Our call to radical Christian hospitality, a hospitality that reads like Paul's letter to the Romans (at least chapter 12, verses 9-21), is about being present with another person, where they are, seeing them for the beautiful creation of God that we all are. And, it is about denying the fear of this world, fear that causes us to turn against the other, the stranger, fear that causes us to close all of the doors around us, locking us in and the rest of the world out, fear that manifests as a desire to

control every little aspect of something in this world because almost nothing in this world is really controllable, and that is terrifying. When we deny the fear of this world, when we push that fear to the side and live into our call to invite, welcome, include all, regardless of who they are, what they look like, what label is attached to them, truly living into the reality of all, this is when we help this world, this is where we can change this world.

We may be able to gain the entire world for ourselves, but if we lose the sense of what our life is really for, then we begin to forfeit that which is promised us in following Christ. Our call to radical hospitality is about denying ourselves, denying that desire to control, to operate within a hermetically sealed environment, closely monitoring and controlling what is allowed to happen within, denying that sense of a life in favor of taking up the cross and living into the hard but necessary life that we must live as followers of Christ. A life of self-sacrifice, self-sacrifice in the truest sense as it manifests itself as a denial of self. A denial of self as we get out of our own way. A denial of self as we begin to focus on the other instead. In taking up the cross we open ourselves to each other. In taking up the cross we commit ourselves to living into a different kind of life. It is in losing our life of living within a cocoon that we find the life that is possible in living a life modeled after Christ, a life that sees us overcome evil with good. For good cannot help but overcome evil, as it spreads out into this world with light, with love, with an invitation to join in, to be a part of a life that actively seeks to invite, welcome, include, a life that shows mutual affection, that shows honor, rejoices in hope, is patient in suffering, perseveres in prayer, that contributes to the needs of the saints, that extends hospitality to strangers.

Amen.