

Hospitality

I find myself still thinking about last week's picnic here at Trinity, when members of St. Peter's and St. Alban's Episcopal Churches joined us. I was glad to see so many of you there. I especially want to thank Dave Arnold and Matt Whitmer for working the hot grills on a hot day, Debbie Thomsen for buying the meat, Karen Brooke for the festive place settings, and all who helped behind the scenes to make it work. It was a real demonstration of our hospitality.

With the picnic in my mind I approached today's readings differently. The real focus in the stories is on *what* was done – Naaman was healed of his leprosy and the seventy were sent on a mission. But what caught my attention was *how* the work was done. In particular, I noticed the way in which hospitality was extended, or not extended, to visitors.

The first example came from the young girl who had been carried away by the Arameans during a raid on Israel. Now she served Naaman's wife and could have borne a grudge and hated the Arameans. Instead, she wanted to help her master. Surprisingly, Naaman listened to her. How different that is from today when we often hear poisonous words about foreigners, as though our ancestors were not once foreigners, too.

The girl told Naaman about a healing prophet in Israel. Naaman told his king and that king sent him to the king of Israel. Naaman did not travel lightly, nor did he neglect to take a big reward. His arrival with the letter requesting healing terrified the king of Israel, who thought that the Arameans were picking a fight. Fortunately, Elisha the prophet heard what was going on and invited Naaman to stop by for a visit.

When Naaman arrived with his entire retinue at Elisha's house, however, the prophet did not even deign to come out to see him. Instead, he sent out his servant. This was clearly not what Naaman expected. He wanted a big production and instead was simply told to go wash in the Jordan River, which he considered dirty and chilly and cold. So Naaman furiously stomped off until his servants could meekly approach him and suggest that he just try it anyway. Naaman did and was made whole once again. We didn't hear the verses that follow. He went back to Elisha and finally had a face-to-face encounter with the prophet. Now that Naaman had humbled himself and done what he was told to do, Elisha consented to show him greater hospitality.

Jesus knew that the seventy he appointed to go ahead of him would get a mixed reception. They were to be entirely dependent on others – no purse, no bag, no sandals – very different from Naaman. They were going to test the reception to Jesus' message by testing the hospitality of those whom they met. First they were to offer peace, and if the peace were received, then they could stay and eat and drink whatever was provided. If they were rejected, however, their peace would return to them. To such inhospitable people Jesus told them to shake the dust off their feet in protest. No matter how they were received, their message was to be the same: the kingdom of God has come near.

Perhaps it's because I've heard this Gospel so many times that I open my door to modern-day two-by-two evangelists, who turn out either to be Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons (oops, sorry – now officially members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, according to a revelation of their oldest elder). I open my door to them but usually come to regret it. The Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, keep coming back with more and more handouts until I can convince them that I'm really not interested. I've never looked to see if they then shake the dust off their feet.

Given the two groups in the Gospel, I suspect we would like to see ourselves as the hospitable ones. Certainly that is true much of the time. I've been repeatedly told by new members how friendly the people of Trinity are. That's wonderful. On the other hand, I notice that the people who say that look a lot like the people who are already here. It is very human to be open to one's own kind, and the church is a very human place. If it weren't, we wouldn't need to confess our sins every week.

Jesus, however, showed a very radical kind of hospitality. He hung out with low-life tax collectors and prostitutes. He gathered a bunch of uneducated fishermen around him. Even his most highly educated convert, St. Paul, was continually getting beaten and run out of town. Jesus knew that his message would be too radical for some. That's why he told the seventy that he was sending them out like lambs into the midst of wolves. It was not going to be easy.

Hospitality can be tricky. We can think we are welcoming when we are not. At coffee hour I often see people sitting with the same groups week after week. Friends will pull up chairs to accommodate more friends, until it looks and acts like a closed system. I often hear about wanting families with children – what every Episcopal church wants – and then hope that parents won't get dirty looks when their children behave like children. There's a lot more all of us can do to be welcoming. And it does take *all* of us.

I do hope that the three Episcopal churches in the Iowa Quad Cities can continue to get together on fifth Sundays. Even more, I hope that each one of us will commit to welcoming others, not only those who come through our doors but also those whom we encounter throughout the week. "All guests should be welcomed as Christ," St. Benedict wrote in his *Rule*. Indeed, that's a good rule for life, welcoming each other as Christ.

[Pentecost 4, Proper 9: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20. The last quote can be found in *The Rule of St. Benedict* 53:1.]