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Today is the 13th Sunday of OT, and the 16th Sunday of Masses in Isolation. By my count, in 2020, we experienced only 10 Sundays of “regular” Mass, and so oddly enough, our weekly Zoom eucharists (or as Darren likes to say, zeucharists), have truly become the new normal. Frequently, Mark and I have marvelled about our current way of life, saying something like, “At Christmas, we couldn’t even have imagined that this would be our situation now...”. A corollary to that expression is that any recounting of these days -- any future movies or books or songs – will have to provide some context for why, in the blink of an eye, we began disinfecting our groceries, wearing masks, and hoarding toilet paper. Context matters. Context really matters.

So too with the readings this morning, context matters, and thus some background is required in order for these enigmatic readings to yield their message. In brief, today’s readings share a common theme of hospitality, and they invite us to consider what it means to offer and to receive hospitality. What makes a good host? What makes a good guest?

The first reading is set in the northern Kingdom of Israel, in the 9th century BC. It was a tumultuous time in the north; the Omride dynasty ensured that wealth poured into the kingdom through trade and alliances, but this was available to only the elite, while the poor and those without beneficial social connections, suffered. This was the time when Israel’s great prophets became influential, notably for their insistence on social justice and exclusive worship of the LORD. In 2 Kings 4, Elisha is a newly minted prophet, having taken up the mantle of Elijah (2 Kings 2:13). Elisha’s name means “God is salvation” or “My God saves” and in this brief episode he has a very curious exchange with a nameless woman from Shunem, a region in the very northern part of the Kingdom of Israel. Although we do not learn her name, we are told that she is wealthy, and by all accounts it is she who runs the household. Notice that she doesn’t ask her husband’s permission to build a guest room for Elisha, she tells him (2 Kings 4:10)!

Her rationale for providing Elisha with shelter and a well-appointed room is because she recognizes with certainty that he is “a holy man of God”. Throughout the Old Testament, recognition of God and the works of God is a marker of wisdom, thus the Great Woman of Shunem is not only wealthy, but also wise. Her hospitality recalls that of Abraham’s when he entertained the three travellers, and to be sure, the narrative continues to echo Abraham’s experience when Elisha promises the Wise Woman of Shunem a son.



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However, before we reach that point, we must take a moment to look closely at this reading. A significant issue with our lectionary is that frequently passages that involve women and women's voices are abbreviated or redacted. In this case, the lectionary focusses on Elisha's and Gehazi's magnanimity at the expense of hearing what the woman has to say. Let's hear it in full:

*11 One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. 12He said to his servant Gehazi, 'Call the Shunammite woman.' When he had called her, she stood before him. 13He said to him, 'Say to her, Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?' She answered, 'I live among my own people.' 14He said, 'What then may be done for her?' Gehazi answered, 'Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.' 15He said, 'Call her.' When he had called her, she stood at the door. 16He said, 'At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.' She replied, 'No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.'*

Notice the dynamic between Elisha and the Woman. He is anxious to recognize her hospitality, and so he offers to make her household known to the king or army commander. She insists "I live among my own people". In other words, she states that her identity is secure. And yet, we learn from Gehazi that in fact her social situation is precarious. She has no son, and her husband is old. Even if she is young herself and has daughters, the lack of a male child would mean that the family line faced extinction, and the death of her husband would leave her without a social anchor. To our ears, a house guest who declares that his host will become pregnant might be a little bit awkward, but for the Wise Woman of Shunem, Elisha's promise to her is one of social salvation. So vital is a son that the Wise Woman of Shunem cautions Elisha not to deceive her – false hope would be too much to bear. She does indeed, bear a son, and so together the Wise Woman of Shunem and Elisha model a reciprocal relationship of host and guest: she provides him with shelter, food, and safety, and he leaves her, not depleted, but blessed with a new-found future of life and lineage. Yet the woman's caution reveals how fragile good hospitality is. The balance of reciprocity between host and guest can easily be upset. It relies on mutual respect and care for the other's well-being.



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Turning to the Gospel, we pick up nearly where we left off last week in Matthew 10. At first, Jesus' words seem rather grim, "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me," he says, and "whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Surrounded as I am by my children, and with my own parents listening, these are not exactly comforting words. But I think what Jesus intends here is a covenantal reminder of the decalogue given to Moses. After all, Matthew's gospel in particular emphasises that Jesus has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). In the ten commandments, love of God is of the first order, with honour to one's parents coming only after exclusivity of worship has been established. Jesus implies that a well-ordered relationship with one's parents and children reflects a well-ordered relationship with God.

The next part of the gospel is where we can see why it has been paired up with the Shunammite Woman and Elisha. Matthew 10 is, in fact, when the twelve apostles are named and sent (Matt 10:1-4), and the chapter ends with these words of reassurance, no doubt of comfort to the apostles who had left their homes and livelihoods to follow Jesus. Jesus declares that those who welcome the apostles, welcome himself and the Father. The next verses are very powerful: Whoever welcomes in the name of a prophet (e.g. Elisha) will receive the reward of a prophet. Whoever welcomes in the name of a righteous person (e.g. Abraham), will receive the reward of a righteous person. And whoever gives a cup of cold water to a little one (that is, a person without rights or status), in the name of a disciple (e.g. James, or John, or Andrew or Philip...) will not lose their reward.

Although this doesn't seem terribly earth-shattering, it would have been a stretch for Jesus' hearers given the norms of the day. Welcoming a prophet or a righteous person would be easily done – these were notable figures, respected in their communities, and sought after for their company. But showing hospitality to "one of these little ones" in the name of a disciple (i.e. a person who had left his family and livelihood to follow Jesus)? That would have been a socially destructive thing to do. Social interactions were governed then (as now) by a serious system of honour and shame, and the motivation would normally be to offer hospitality to someone who would maintain one's honour or increase it. Offering hospitality to a child in the name of a nobody disciple was a serious risk. As ever, Jesus' point is that the person who takes such a risk will be recognized, not by human standards of success, but by Godself.



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In our time, when exchanges of hospitality are, as fr. Daniel observed last week, fraught with fear and danger, these readings prompt us to think deeply about the contours of hospitality in our evolving social landscape. We might be inclined to dwell at length on the impact of Covid-19 on hospitality – after all, the pandemic has had the most immediately obvious effect on our daily lives. But as I mentioned at the outset, context matters, and so what if we also consider the other pandemic -- the pandemic of racism and discrimination, in light of the question of hospitality? For example, during this week when we will celebrate Canada Day, we might also give time to consider the fractured host/guest relationship between Indigenous Peoples and European settlers that began five hundred years ago and continues to this day. Rather than guests who contributed to the life of their hosts, European politicians and law makers left Indigenous people depleted and disconnected from their lineages.

Or what if we consider Black Lives Matter in light of hospitality? If we are people of colour, can notions of hospitality and being a host help to give expression to the demands for equality and justice? If we are white, what does it mean to be a good guest? Does one's listening, reading, and acting contribute to the life and dignity of one's hosts?

If we are immigrants, or people married to immigrants, or people descended from immigrants, how are we both hosts and guests to each other?

This weekend is Pride Weekend in Toronto. How might notions of hospitality help to build opportunities for listening, understanding, and compassion?

Paul's letter to the Romans emphasizes the immersive experience of baptism into the death and life of Christ. The result is that one becomes "alive to God in Christ Jesus". I suggest that this could, by extension, point all of us to the radically reorienting insight that being alive to God in Christ Jesus is being aware of one's "guest-ness" to Christ our host. When we see each other as all guests at the table, our mutual hospitality to one another vivifies the body of Christ. This view of hospitality is akin to the Decalogue's reminder that God is first above all and all relationships flow must flow from this. When we deeply trust in this, we can, like the Wise Woman of Shunem, offer hospitality to the brother or sister of God in our midst.

**Mrs. Andrea Di Giovanni, O.P.**