

Hosting the Divine
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HOSTING THE DIVINE

Let us pray. Lord, take our lips and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our hands and work through them. Take our hearts, and set them on fire. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Part and parcel to being a young, married couple is having other young, married couples over for dinner. My husband and I have a few couples with whom we connect well, and we often take turns hosting dinner. For me, it's a joyful time. I love to cook, and I enjoy creating a meal for my loved ones to enjoy. I like setting the stage for a relaxing, comfortable dinner.

But all of this joyful comfort fell apart on one occasion, when Kevin and I had invited new neighbors of ours over for dinner. A young and easy-going couple themselves, this should have been a dinner like any other. But there was a catch: the husband was a gourmet chef. We lived right over them in our first apartment, and at least once a week, I would come home from work to savory smells wafting up from the windows of their downstairs apartment into our upstairs. And so, that night, I was racing madly around the kitchen. Everything had to be perfect! My table settings, the centerpiece, the intended menu, especially the food, everything! Until dinner was over, I was completely on edge, falling over myself in order to be the perfect hostess. I was too caught up in my own emotions, my own circumstances, to be an effective hostess.

Our Gospel lesson this morning tells the story of two disciples of Jesus who are also caught up in their own circumstances. A stranger begins to walk with them on their journey to Emmaus. The passage tells us that "their eyes were kept from recognizing" that the stranger was, in fact, Jesus. Scholars have wondered over the years about this oddity: perhaps this was a divine, intentional blindness on Jesus' part. Or maybe their blindness is meant to point to their misunderstanding the true purpose behind Jesus' death. Or the answer could be quite simple: maybe these were disciples who were not so intimately acquainted with Jesus when he was alive that they would have recognized him, anyway. Whatever the case, the disciples are too preoccupied with their own thoughts and feelings to see who this fellow traveler is. They are astounded at his ignorance of the recent goings-on in Jerusalem. Word of Jesus' importance and painful death must have traveled. "Are you only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

Can you imagine the irony Jesus must have felt here? They, who are ignorant of Jesus' identity, are presuming that the crucified and risen One has no knowledge of his own crucifixion. As my dad used to say, "You can't make this stuff up; it has to be true." But Jesus, rather than rubbing their noses in his true identity, responds with an innocent question. "What things?"

Jesus could have revealed himself right there. They probably would have been just as amazed, and my guess is that they probably would have run back to the disciples and told them about their encounter with Jesus on the road. The same result would have come about. (As a quick aside, this type of big revelation is likely what the disciples expected. They said, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." They are looking for an outward, divine redemption of Israel.) So Jesus could have saved a lot of time, and a lot of walking, by showing them who he was early into their Emmaus journey.

But Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, Jesus responds in a hospitable manner, with a more humble approach. He meets them where they are on their journey, their physical journey, their

cognitive journey, and their emotional journey. He physically walks with them to Emmaus, using the time on the road to teach the disciples even more about the connections between the scriptures and Himself. He wants to hear their emotional story, why they are sad. He wants to know what they think cognitively about these wild rumors that one who has died has now been seen alive again. In short, He wants to reach them. In this way, Jesus serves as the perfect host, who is keenly interested in the specific needs of the person whom he is serving. He does not come in a rapid-fire blaze of glory, even though that certainly would have gotten the message across, and was indeed what was expected. But Jesus cares about more than just getting a message across. He gives his guests what they need, slowly interacting with them, causing their confused and saddened hearts to begin to kindle with a flame of interest. No rapid fires here-- Jesus wants their hearts to burn, and to burn for a long time.

For logistical reasons, the disciples ask Jesus to stay with them for the evening. This was a cultural tradition in the ancient Near East. Thinking back to the Old Testament, you may remember that Abraham tells Sarah to hurry and prepare food for the strangers who have entered his tent. The moral codes laid out in the book of Deuteronomy mandate that people care for the strangers in their midst. This was an act of common courtesy, well established in the context of the time. In fact, the Greek word used in the New Testament for "hospitality" is "philoxenus," which literally translates to, "Loving a stranger." The history behind the Old Testament Hebrew word is even more interesting. In fact, the Hebrew word for "host" can also be translated as "stranger" and "guest." Guest and host, at first blush, are usually seen as antonyms; one is the giver, and the other is the receiver. But the moral codes of the day dictated that, when a stranger was treated as a guest, there was an understood obligation that this would be reciprocated should the original host ever find himself a stranger in the first guest's land. In this way, the guest would then become the host, and the host the guest. Same word in Hebrew.

Like Abraham and Sarah in their story of hospitality, the disciples in Emmaus belatedly realize that they are hosting a divine presence. And, in an interesting twist, Jesus, although he's a guest in the disciples' home, decides to play the role of host when he takes the bread and breaks it. Whether it is the familiar gesture, or Jesus' choice to reveal himself in that moment, the disciples' eyes are opened, and they recognize Jesus. He disappears, and they are left with indescribable wonder. Immediately—that same hour—they excitedly make their way back to Jerusalem. The logistics of this journey are downright silly; it is late in the day, they are all tired, they travel back in the dark, they retrace their steps and return the same several miles they just came. But it's the same pattern we see time and again in the stories of the Resurrected Jesus: when encountered with the Risen Christ, thinking logically just doesn't happen. Encounters with sheer love and divine grace can do that to a person, I think. So they return to the disciples and proclaim, "The Lord is risen indeed!" The Easter message is true.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we know that the Easter message is true indeed. As are the messages this post-Easter text gives to us. This is a rich story, and there is a lot we could talk about. Today, I want to leave you with two observations.

The first observation is that Jesus met the disciples where they were, just as they were. Jesus could have revealed himself in a bright blaze of wonderment and glory. But he does not. His approach is more humble. So too is He with us. Unlike how I tried to entertain my chef guest with good, impressive service, Jesus is not an entertainer. He is a host. And to entertain and to host are two very different actions. To entertain is self-serving. To host is selfless. Jesus serves as a humble host on the road, and continues humbly when they reach Emmaus. Jesus does not force himself into the dwelling; the disciples invite him to stay. Of all people who have reason to be self-assertive, Jesus is God. But instead, Jesus chose to take the form of a humble servant, a humble host.

My second observation is that the disciples then became Jesus' host. Not only did they invite him in—the minimum cultural requirements for an amateur host in New Testament days—but they then became genuine hosts, selfless carriers of his message, really of Jesus Himself, to the other disciples. They followed in Jesus' footsteps. They ignored their own journey and went back to Jerusalem, because that's where the need was, where the disciples were, hurting and wondering about what to do next. They encountered them where they were physically, emotionally, cognitively, in order to share the Good News. These two Emmaus disciples met with Jesus, and then went out and followed His example. They could do no other. There is a message of mission for us in this passage. Mission has always been central to the church being the church. I'm not talking about mission in terms of making converts, but mission in terms of remaining true to the commandment to love one another in the Name of Jesus Christ. Mission in terms of meeting other people on their journey, accompanying them wherever they might be on their life's journey, and showing them that Jesus walks there, too.

We are all called at times to be the host, serving and offering grace to the other. And at times we are called to receive grace, to be the guests being served by another. Who in your life today, could you stand to be more gracious to, more hospitable to? Pause. For some of you, the next question will be more challenging. Who is in your life at this point in your journey to serve you? And will you be humble enough to receive that grace, that hospitality? Who in your life needs to see you as a host of the Christian message? Pause.

Whenever we act as host or guest to any child of God, we honor the Holy Spirit who lives inside of all of us. We carry the divine within us, and we host the divine within us. Like the disciples in Emmaus, may our eyes become ever more frequently opened to the work of God in and around us, and the work to which God has called us to do, not to entertain, but to host, and to serve. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.