
Welcoming Strangers, Entertaining Angels

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 17 – Year B

Think about a time you've experienced hospitality—that deep sense that you're home, that you've been welcomed into a special place and community, and have been accepted, as you are. For me, one of the places I experience hospitality most vividly is, ironically, in a prison. Every week, I get to gather around a makeshift altar with about twenty-five incarcerated women and outside volunteers for the Holy Eucharist.

As an ordained priest, I'm the designated minister, but I am not the *only* minister here. There are our readers, intercessors, ushers, and guitarists, and all of us who sing, for better or for worse. There's our one-person acolyte and altar-guild combo. There are several lay preachers—far more eloquent and inspired than I could ever be. And there's a whole community of care: very different people from many walks of life, who encourage and care for one another. And for me, too.

Every time I'm around this group of women, I'm overcome with awe, and gratitude.

When I first went to the prison six years ago to teach a class, I didn't see them the way I do now. My vision was clouded by the razor wire and locked gates and khaki uniforms stamped "Property of the State." I didn't really see the women underneath the uniforms, not clearly, at least. I saw them through stereotypes, and through the eyes of pity. Though I wasn't scared, I'm aware that many first-time visitors see them through the eyes of fear, as well.

The only time I was scared was when I first met one-on-one with the only woman on death row in Georgia at the time, Kelly. I wasn't scared of her; I'd known her from a distance before this. I was just scared that we wouldn't have anything to talk about—not enough to fill our two hours together. I was scared I'd say something stupid that revealed my ignorance of her reality.

But when we sat down at the metal table in the solitary visitation room, I found myself in the company of a joyful, compassionate woman—a mother and a daughter like me, who was just as nervous as I was. And all my assumptions about who she was and what she needed flew out the window, as we got to know each other.

There's something transformative about sitting at a table together, whether it's a small visitation table bolted to the floor; a grand dining room table or a humble one; a Communion table; or the metaphorical table that everyone wants a seat at, where important things are discussed and decisions made.

But it can be awkward and intimidating to come to the table with someone who seems so different from ourselves and in such dire need. Often, it's more comfortable to assert our difference and distance, by insisting on helping or doing *for*, than it is to simply share a meal and conversation. In her work on hospitality, Christine Pohl observes, "We are familiar with roles as helpers, but are less certain about being equals eating together. Many of us struggle with simply being with people in need; our helping roles give definition to the relationship but they also keep it decidedly hierarchical." [\[1\]](#)

We *are* supposed to help, of course! The Bible tells us this over and over: care for the widow and orphan, visit the sick and imprisoned, seek justice for the poor! But our obligation doesn't stop there. We're also to come to the table—to be table companions, especially with those who are most vulnerable or neglected or despised in our society.

So in our Gospel this morning, Jesus tells the Pharisee host that he shouldn't invite only friends and relatives and rich neighbors to his Sabbath meal. He should also invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind, who, though they can't repay him in kind, also deserve a place at the table and have their own blessing to offer.

And imagine what happens when they're all at the same table, having discarded the usual, hierarchical seating chart, at Jesus' insistence. They begin to step out of their prescribed roles and identities, and to genuinely delight in each other.

The Pharisee leader recognizes the hard-earned faith of the poor person he'd been so quick to judge. He admires the pure grit of the man he had pitied for his disability; and he learns from the piercing vision of the woman he'd thought couldn't see.

Likewise, his guests recognize in him, whom they'd labeled an unapproachable snob, a man who loves God and truly wants to do God's will. They all begin to see something of themselves in one another—and something of God there, too.

Yes, as you all know already, there's something about sitting at the table and breaking bread together that changes the way we see and interact with each other. It challenges prejudices and social divisions. It subverts the assumed giver-receiver dynamic that often leaves the receiver feeling even more distant, humiliated, and inferior.

While it *is* absolutely critical to provide for the vulnerable and to protect their rights, that's not all they need. As Pohl says, "They also need connection to living communities; otherwise, they remain anonymous and vulnerable." [\[i\]](#) They, like all of us, also long to be seen, heard, and known. And they, like all of us, also want to give'—to be the host. It's an empowering role, which says that this is *my* place, and *I* have something valuable to offer.

Sometimes, hospitality means inviting people without power or status in, literally. But other times, it means going out, outside of our own comfort zones, to meet strangers where *they're* most comfortable. It means giving up our own power in order to a guest in their world, depending on their hospitality, and discovering how much they have to give, as well.

With this, hospitality moves us. It moves us from judgment to compassion, from pity to respect, from a helping relationship based on power, to a healthy relationship based on mutual love. It moves us from welcoming strangers, to entertaining angels. And it reminds us that we are all guests of the one true Host.

[\[i\]](#) Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans, 1999), 74.

[\[ii\]](#) Pohl, 83.