Hospitality Is Biblical—and It’s Not Optional

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It’s not a coincidence that Jesus did most of his teaching while at table over a meal. Learning at the table would have been natural to him. As a boy, he probably first learned many of the traditions and history of the Jewish people through mealtime prayers and from the celebratory rituals that preceded feasts. Jewish prayers are filled with history and are often mini-catechisms.

Once Jesus began his public ministry, he was often on the road and had to depend on the hospitality of strangers for meals and a place to rest. Not only did he use those meals as an opportunity to teach, but he also used the language of hospitality to describe God and his kingdom.

That hospitality was an important virtue would have been an old idea even in Jesus’ time. The theme of the necessary, yet precarious, relationship between guest and host was a familiar one to the ancient Hebrews as well as to other ancient cultures (see “My Big Fat Greek Welcome”). Hospitality in the ancient world was much more than politeness or friendliness. In an age when inns were few and far between, travelers had to rely upon the hospitality of strangers to aid them in their journeys. Hospitality was also a way to survive in a culture where political boundaries were in constant flux. A traveler might find himself in unfriendly territory all too quickly.

The Israelites were hospitable out of a sense of communal responsibility, out of obedience to the Mosaic law, and because of their desire to please God. Proverbs says even enemies must be given the necessities of survival, because generosity is a reproof to those who lack that virtue: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you” (Prov. 25:21–22).

**In the Beginning**

The biblical lessons of hospitality begin in Genesis, at the beginning of salvation history. The stories of Abraham and others illustrate the way a guest should be treated. When three strangers approached his tent, he ran out to greet them and prepared a lavish meal for them. He later learned that they were God’s messengers sent to reveal that his formerly barren wife would bear a son.

Hosts had a sacred obligation to provide food and drink, water to wash their feet, and a place to rest. The guest had an obligation to accept what was offered. The refusal on either part was a serious breach of honor.

The obligations of hospitality also included protecting the guest from harm. The seriousness of this obligation is shown in the story of Lot, who offered his daughters to an angry mob rather than allow guests who “have come under the shelter of my roof” (Gen. 19:8) to be harmed. (Those guests turned out to be messengers from God.) In return, the guest had a solemn obligation not to harm the host. In the ancient world—and still today in some cultures—the sharing of food constituted a covenant of friendship, and one of the most despicable acts would be to eat with someone and then betray him. Knowing that adds another dimension to Judas’s betrayal.

Other stories that illustrate the power and importance of hospitality abound in the Old Testament. For example, Abraham’s servant is so generously received by Rebecca at the well that he recognizes her as the perfect wife for Isaac (Gen. 24). And in the second book of Kings, the prophets Elijah and Elisha repay their hosts by curing their sons. In a gesture of gratitude prefiguring the Eucharist, Elijah blesses his hostess’s grain so that it never runs out (2 Kgs. 4).

The Mosaic law explicated the necessity of hospitality. Having known from their years in slavery in Egypt what it was like to be a foreigner at the mercy of their hosts, the Israelites had a special kinship with strangers, which the laws of Moses reiterated: “You shall not oppress a stranger . . . for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9). In Leviticus, Christ’s golden rule is prefigured: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33–34).

The repetition of the refrain “for you were strangers” reminded the Hebrews to be hospitable out of sympathy and charity, in addition to obedience to the law of God handed down through Moses. They were dependent on God’s assistance when they were in the desert; now they must respond with generosity when others are in trouble.

Other Mosaic laws instructed the community on how strangers who stayed for a length of time should fit into the society. They were to participate in sacrifices and allowed to celebrate feasts. They were welcome to glean the fields. In return, guests were expected to follow the laws of Israel as long as they abided there (cf. Lev. 17:12–13; 18:26; 19:10; Num. 15:16).

Strangers, like the poor, widows, and orphans, should be shown special generosity: God “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18). Yet despite these laws requiring generosity toward strangers, there was still a distance to be kept. Marrying a foreigner was frowned upon if not forbidden, and outsiders were not to eat “holy things” (Lev. 22:10, 12).

**In the Fullness of Time**

That distance was bridged by Christ. In the New Testament, when Paul calls on the early Christians to show hospitality to strangers, he links hospitality to Christ’s commandment to love, which is the New Law. Paul, perhaps thinking of Abraham, writes, “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:1–2). Paul’s encouragement of brotherly love implies that the distance between the foreigner and host can be bridged. For the Christian, the stranger is also a brother or a neighbor who represents Christ and who also may be a messenger from God. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Christ broadens the concept of “neighbor” to define it more by actions than by proximity.

This New Law, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out, fulfills and perfects the Old Law. It does not add to or abolish the Old Law but “proceeds to reform the heart, the root of human acts, where man chooses between the pure and the impure, where faith, hope, and charity are formed and with them the other virtues. The gospel thus brings the law to its fullness through imitation of the perfection of the heavenly Father, through forgiveness of enemies and prayer for persecutors, in emulation of the divine generosity” (CCC 1968).

Christ’s commandment to love one another as he loves deepens the understanding of neighborly love with which the Jews were familiar. Jesus not only says, “Love your neighbor as yourself” but invites us to love as he loves: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12–13). Christ includes even enemies when he says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45).

**Christ as Guest and Host**

The idea that love of neighbor is an act of sacrificial love adds a new dimension to the virtue of hospitality. Hospitality becomes a means to serve others and Christ in them. Christ lives this humble service by becoming a traveler himself, dependent on the hospitality of both Pharisees and tax collectors alike. He journeys from town to town preaching about true charity, himself a stranger who must be welcomed: “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20).

Christ shares much of his wisdom while dining with others. The lesson that he repeats at the table of Zacchaeus is that he has come to heal the afflicted, to eat with the sinners, and to call those who have strayed from God: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matt. 9:12). He thus reminds us that an essential part of hospitality is ministering to the needs of guests.

Jesus also ties hospitality into his description of who will inherit heaven: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me . . .Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:34–36, 40).

These passages make it clear that in order to be welcomed into heaven, we must welcome and serve others. Time and again, even at the Last Supper, Jesus reminded his disciples that to love means to put others first: “Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:44). Many potential followers of Christ turn away because this call to active service requires detachment from material goods, family connections, and physical comforts. We see this in the story of the rich young man (Mark 10:17–22). If we are to follow Christ, we must be willing to put all we have at the service of others. In other words, we must practice hospitality not just out of courtesy or duty—it has to cost us something. As John Paul II said, “Welcoming Christ in our needy brothers and sisters is the condition of being able to meet him face to face and perfectly at the end of our earthly journey” (Homily for the Jubilee of Migrants and Itinerant Workers, June 2, 2000).

**Heaven Is a Banquet**

Not surprisingly, Jesus describes heaven in terms of hospitality. He says to Peter, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:2–4).

And when Jesus says, “Come and follow me” (Matt. 11:28), he is inviting us all to a feast—both the eternal heavenly banquet and the eucharistic feast. In his parables, Jesus describes the heavenly banquet as a marriage feast. The invited guests decline because they are too busy with material cares. In their place, the host has his servants invite the poor, the lame, and the afflicted—those who will appreciate it and be grateful. It is these whom God will invite to the heavenly banquet. “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). And yet, God is a forgiving host: “Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9).

Jesus elaborates on the forgiving nature of God’s hospitality in the story of the prodigal son. Just as the father welcomes home with open arms the profligate son and sets to rejoicing, God will welcome into heaven those who sin but ask forgiveness. Meanwhile, most of us sympathize with the older son who grumbles over his brother’s reception. We, too, lack gratitude and envy the feast laid for others instead of being humble like the wayward son, aware of his need, and grateful for what little he might receive.

**Hospitality and the Eucharist**

Ultimately, all of these teachings on hospitality come together in the Eucharist, in which we welcome Christ into our hearts, offering all that we are to him. Like the centurion whose words we echo at every Mass, we do not feel worthy to receive Christ (literally, to have him under our roof), but we need his love and redemption to heal us. Christ invites us to his feast and offers himself as our bread and our home: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (John 6:56).

The early Christians understood the connection between receiving Christ in the Eucharist and sharing hospitality with others. In Acts, we read that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:42, 46). Their homes truly were domestic churches with doors open to receive others.

Similarly, we must receive Christ in the Eucharist with “glad and generous hearts.” The Eucharist is a celebration, and like all good feasts, it requires guests. As in the parable of the marriage feast, Christ prefers the neediest guests. When we offer our needs and shortcomings at his table, Christ the Host offers forgiveness, like the generous master of his parables, and renews grace in our hearts. Mary and Martha of Bethany knew that time spent welcoming Christ allows us to serve others more generously.

**Living Christian Hospitality**

Our challenge is to share with others the message that Christ’s love cures all ills. Using the example of Christ meeting his disciples on the road to Emmaus, John Paul II links our reception of Christ in the Eucharist with a call to serve others: “Like the disciples of Emmaus, believers, supported by the living presence of the risen Christ, become in turn the traveling companions of their brothers and sisters in trouble, offering them the word that rekindles hospitality in their hearts. With them they break the bread of friendship, brotherhood, and mutual help” (Homily, June 2, 2000). Our response to receiving Christ in the Eucharist is to welcome others in his name.

The early Christians relied on the older Jewish and Gentile conventions of hospitality to find food and lodging while teaching about Christ’s words of welcome. Made pilgrims by their desire to share the gospel and in political exile because of their faith in Christ, the early Christians probably thought often of the Israelites in the desert. The life of a wayfarer would not have been easy. Peter urges the followers of Jesus to behave well so that their actions will evangelize the Gentiles: “Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12). Later, he urges them to remember that love requires serving others: “Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another” (1 Pet. 4:8–9).

Like the early Christians, we must also rely on and offer hospitality as a means of sharing the gospel. By creating a welcoming home, we make the Christian life attractive. With further insight, John Paul II writes, “Welcoming our brothers and sisters with care and willingness must not be limited to extraordinary occasions but must become for all believers a habit of service in their daily lives” (Address to volunteer workers, March 8, 1997).

As believers, we are sustained by the Eucharist to welcome not only strangers but also neighbors and family. Being hospitable means being vulnerable and potentially suffering the pains of living closely with those who most clearly see our faults. In marriage, being hospitable spills into how open we are to life and children. Christian hospitality requires the humility of loving service toward each member of the family, including those with whom it might be difficult to get along. But the rough spots of family life offer the most opportunity for growing in charity and holiness.

**Mary Is Our Model**

We can also look to Mary for a perfect example of this understanding of hospitality as a call to loving service. After she welcomes Christ in conception, Mary rushes to serve Elizabeth, who receives Mary with open arms, recognizing her holy guest. One can only imagine the companionship and comfort the two provided each other, both of whom had become hostesses in the most intimate way to the infants in their wombs.

Later in Bethlehem, Mary continued to welcome strangers and to share the gift of her child. Although she and Joseph found no lodging for themselves in Bethlehem, Mary received the shepherds and wise men who wanted to welcome Jesus without fussing about her surroundings or fretting about what food to serve. When she and her family had to flee to Egypt, she relied on the generosity of others to shelter her family from Herod’s deadly reach.

The miracle at the wedding feast in Cana further demonstrates Mary’s generous and hospitable heart. She takes pity on the wedding host and asks Jesus to help him. Her sensitivity to the need to continue the wedding feast reflects the importance of communion and feast in the presence of the Bridegroom. And Jesus’ response shows not only his respect for his Mother but also his understanding of the sacred nature of hospitality. When he takes plain water and makes fine wine, he shows us how much he can do even with the little we offer.

**Come on In!**

Fortunately, the idea that hospitality is a virtue is being revived. The continuing success of World Youth Day has taught many people about the graces received by welcoming strangers and receiving hospitality. In honor of World Youth Day, private homes, parishes, religious communities, and civil organizations open their doors to pilgrims and strangers in the tradition of ancient cultures welcoming foreign travelers without question. As Pope Benedict XVI remarked in Cologne, “It is a fine thing that on such occasions the virtue of hospitality, which has almost disappeared and is one of man’s original virtues, should be renewed and enable people of all states of life to meet.”

We should also keep in mind what John Paul II said: “Only those who have opened their hearts to Christ can offer a hospitality that is never formal or superficial but identified by ‘gentleness’ and ‘reverence’ (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15).”

Our homes and our churches should be places where everyone feels at home. Guests should never feel that they are causing undue extra labor. In short, all that is really needed to be an excellent host is a loving heart, an open ear, and eyes that see Christ in each person who crosses the threshold.