

REFLECTIONS FOR THE 13TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 02 July 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Radical hospitality, walking in newness of life, a cup of cold water – these far from ordinary images glimmer through our readings in this “ordinary time.”

Radical hospitality is expressed in two very different ways – by a woman who was influential in a time not known for women holding power and by a man who influenced the face of this Earth by compassion and not by control. The woman of Shumen is not given a name, but we are told she is “great” (Hebrew *gedola*), translated “wealthy” in our present English version of the text. She recognizes that Elisha is a “holy man of God” and welcomes him into her home. She informs her husband that they will provide a private space for him to stay whenever he is visiting Shunem. She is a woman of influence who seems to have financial and emotional security. She is not only hospitable, but also spiritually sensitive and keenly observant. She respects and is in awe of Elisha but is not intimidated by him. She does not expect to or want to benefit materially from her hospitality to Elisha. When he promises her that she will have a child, she is practical in her response.



As we know from the story beyond today’s text, when she indeed does conceive and have a child and that child later becomes ill and dies, she is not hesitant in demanding that Elisha live up to his calling as a holy man of God. Once again, she lets her husband know what she is doing, but she does not ask for his permission. She simply assures him that “it will be all right,” words that she repeats to Elisha’s servant Gehazi who intercepts her as if to keep her from the prophet. Elisha comes and heals her son. Later in 2 Kings, Elisha alerts the woman to the coming famine and she and her household flee to safety.



Once the famine is over, she returns to the land and demands that the king return her land to her. The king, having heard the story of Elisha and her son, does as she demands, “Restore all that was hers, together with all the revenue of the fields from the day that she left the land until now” (2 Kgs 8:6). This independent woman who manages her own household, is fully trusted by her husband, and challenges the ruler of her land to treat her justly is a mirror of the “capable woman” of Proverbs 31. By her radical hospitality given freely and generously without any hope of return, she opens up unexpected pathways that bring her new life.

In the passage from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus speaks about this same gesture of radical hospitality, making reference to the welcoming of a prophet, an echo of the story from 2 Kings. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Matt 10:40). There is a beautiful sculpture by Timothy Schmalz called “Angels Unawares” that reflects this verse as well as the parallel verse from Hebrews (13:2), “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Angels Unawares
Timothy Schmalz
St. Peter's Square



The Rule of St. Benedict from the 6th century speaks about hospitality, "Every guest who comes to the monastery shall be received as if he were Christ Himself." A spiritual writer, Jim Forest, reminds us, "There is not only hospitality of the door, but also of the face and heart." A good Benedictine, Joan Chittister, quotes Ram Dass about another religious culture's focus on hospitality, "When people meet and part they often say, 'Namaste,' which means: I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides; I honor the place in you of love, of light, of truth, of peace. I honor the place within you where if you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us....'Namaste.'"

Jesus goes on to say something quite remarkable because it reminds us that radical hospitality is not only about great deeds and grand gestures, but it lies in the small ordinary deeds, "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (Matt 10:34). Naomi King explores this theme in a lovely prayer-poem:

Beloved, teach us to open our shuttered hearts
and our portioned and boarded up spirits
with bold generous and with courageous hospitality.
Estranged and alienated so often and from so much,
sustain us in making circles of welcome
out of gatherings of strangers.
Around the table of wonder, meet us in abundance,
drawing out our stories and showing us how to weave together community with steadfast love.
The wells of life are our responsibilities;
teach us to care for them together,
with forbearance, forgiveness, gratitude, and rejoicing.
When we are cast out and wandering,
may we find welcome and compassion
that calls us back into accountable relationship,
into the ways of healing, into the ways of peace.
Generation after generation has learned anew
how to make welcome,
how to make home wherever they are, however they are,
and how to welcome You, Beloved,
in welcoming enemies, strangers, and exiles
into a life of transforming love. Amen.

This week let each one of us ask: how am I making circles of welcome out of gatherings of strangers, how am I weaving together communities with steadfast love by simply sharing stories, how am I caring for the wells of life, how am I finding welcome in my own life?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that “Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:7). In speaking about walking in newness of life, Paul is reiterating a theme common in the Old Testament. The psalmist tells us, “Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance” (Ps 89:15). Just think for a moment what this means – walking in the light of God’s face! When are our faces most alight? Of course, it is when we smile. Think of the smile of your mother, your father, the person whom you love most in this world, that person whose whole demeanor changes when they smile. Now imagine walking in the light of God’s smile! What did you do this past week that made God smile? It was probably when you made another person smile because you stopped long enough to listen to them tell you a story, or you said good morning to someone who often chooses not to speak to you, or you said thank you to a very busy person who was doing something to help you, or you did something for someone because they needed it even though you were very busy yourself. What did you do this past week that made God smile?

Making circles of welcome, sharing a cup of cold water with the little one, weaving communities of steadfast love, singing of God’s steadfast love, making God smile – what wonderful actions seemingly so small and ordinary that bring us into newness of life every single day. Let us take to heart this reflection by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “A Cup of Water”:

We forget how thirsty we all are
for hope and gratitude.
Don’t pass up an opportunity today
to offer a cup to one of the little ones
(who of course are angels in disguise):
to encourage, to appreciate, to give thanks
to the one checking your groceries,
or delivering your mail,
or doing their best to be a decent person.
Notice how offering a cup of grace
quenches your own longing, too.
God is thirsty for our love for each other
and every little cup is a delight
that satisfies us all.



AND GOD SMILES