

“Guests Bring Us to God and Bring the World In”
 Proper 22B (World Communion Sunday; October 7, 2018)
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder, and let it matter. Amen.<<

Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister, once wrote: “guests bring us to God ... and guests bring the world in.” Guests, she continues, “place [the world] at our feet, and dare us to be who and what we say we are.”

Sister Chittister’s comments about guests made me think of a recent story about customer service.¹ The story is told by Chris Hurn, the CEO of a commercial capital firm, but, in this case, he shared his story not as a CEO but as a guest. “Most people,” writes Hurn, “have experienced outstanding customer service in one form or another - an attentive server at a restaurant or a retail store employee who goes the extra mile. ... At my company, we’ve always pushed our employees to go the extra mile for clients because [outstanding customer service has] ripple effects Recently,” he continues, “my family and I experienced ... signature customer service [at a hotel] in a way that will be talked about in our family and at my company for many years to come. My wife and two children spent a few days at ... Amelia Island (Florida) while I was in California on business - sadly unable to make the trip with them. Upon returning, we discovered that our son’s beloved stuffed giraffe, named Joshie, had gone missing. As most parents know, children can become very attached to special blankets, teddy bears and the like. My son is extremely fond of his Joshie, and was absolutely distraught when faced with the idea of going to sleep without his favorite pal. While trying to put him to bed the first night home, I decided to tell a little white lie. ‘Joshie is fine,’ I said. ‘He’s just taking an extra long vacation at the resort.’ My son seemed to buy it, and was finally able to fall asleep, Joshie-less for the first time in a long while. That very night,” writes Hurn, “the [hotel where my family had stayed] called to tell us they had Joshie. Thankfully, he had been found, no worse for wear, in the laundry and was handed over to the hotel’s Loss Prevention Team. I came clean to the staff about the story I told my son and asked if they would mind taking a picture of Joshie on a lounge chair by the pool to substantiate my fabricated story. The Loss Prevention Team said they’d do it, and I hung up the phone very relieved. A couple days went by, and we received a package from the hotel. It was my son’s Joshie, along with some [hotel]-branded ‘goodies’ (a frisbee, football, etc.). Also included in the package was a binder that meticulously documented [Joshie’s] extended stay at the [hotel].” In the binder were pictures. One picture was of Joshie wearing sunglasses while sunning himself on a beach chair. Another was of Joshie getting a massage with cucumber slices over his eyes. Another picture was of Joshie sitting beside other stuffed animals; the caption read, “Joshie making friends” There was a shot of Joshie the stuffed giraffe sitting in the driver’s seat of a golf cart. And the last picture was of Joshie sitting in front of a computer screen after being made an honorary member of the ... Loss Prevention Team. Joshie was even given an ID badge as proof. “Needless to say,” writes Hurn, “my wife and I were completely wowed by the ... Loss Prevention Team. My son, on the other hand, didn’t care so much about the binder [of photos,] and was just happy to have his [pal] back.” The lesson Hurn learned from this experience was, in his words, to work to “create an experience so amazing that someone can’t help but tell others about it”

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-hurn/stuffed-giraffe-shows-who_b_1524038.html

Guests, writes Benedictine nun Joan Chittister, “place [the world] at our feet, and dare us to be who and what we say we are.”

All three of our scripture readings for this morning deal with hospitality - deal with being hosts to guests, which is a timely topic for us as we dedicate our kitchen downstairs, and as we celebrate World Communion Sunday - a day when we, along with Christians around the world are celebrating the universality of our faith, the *universalism* of our faith tradition, which recognizes - to quote the third century theologian Origen of Alexandria - that “God is everywhere and in all things,”² including especially in the faces of the guests we welcome. In today’s reading from Genesis, Abraham and Sarah play host to God. The setting of the story is somewhere near the ancient city of Sodom - a city with, we might say, a fiery history, for, not long after eating with Abraham and Sarah, God rains down fire and brimstone on Sodom and its neighboring city Gomorrah, and turns them into ash. God is heading to Sodom with two other individuals when the three of them stop in to visit Abraham and Sarah. The “two other mysterious individuals” traveling with God are called “angels” later in Genesis - though some ancient Christian theologians couldn’t resist seeing the three travelers as members of the Holy Trinity (which is theologically attractive, but highly unlikely). Whoever they were, they were all strangers to Abraham, and when he sees the three of them appear on the horizon, he leaps to his feet and runs to greet them. Bowing with his face to the ground before his guests, Abraham invites them in to soak their sore feet as he and Sarah prepare a feast: breads, meat, and a yogurt dish to dip the bread into. There were no refrigerators back then to pull stuff out of, spur-of-the-moment. All this food is made from scratch while the guests lounge in the shade. It’s an extraordinary display of hospitality: Abraham and Sarah playing host to God, and to a couple of God’s friends.

The purpose of this story in Genesis ch. 18 is to contrast this show of welcome with the simmering rage in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah - a rage that led the residents of Sodom to try to attack the angels who traveled with God instead of treating them as guests as Abraham and Sarah did. The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, in today’s second reading, said the sin of Sodom - the sin that brought fire down from heaven - was hoarding their wealth and prosperity and not sharing it with the poor in their midst or the guest at their door. Or, to put that differently, if the people of Sodom were in charge of that hotel Chris Hurn’s family visited, I suspect Joshie would never have been seen again.

These stories in Genesis contrast Sodom and Gomorrah’s rage and bullying that treats the visitors at their gates as objects to fear and hate with the hospitality shown by Abraham and Sarah to the three travelers at their door - a hospitality that welcomes strangers as guests, and goes the extra mile to make them as comfortable as possible. The one is driven by fear; the other by love.

In the Hulu series based on Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there’s a scene in Episode 10 that illustrates these contrasting hospitalities.³ The protagonist is June Osborne, who is a handmaid along with many other women living in a post-apocalyptic America called “Gilead.” Gilead has reduced women’s rights as human beings to their function in the home, and reduced handmaid’s rights to mere procreation. Gilead is portrayed as a heterosexual male fantasyland. June Osborne’s best friend is Moira, who is also a

² Origen, *De Principiis*, III.4.2.

³ Watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-s55Zp6hVg>

handmaid. In Episode 10, Moira escapes the horrors of Gilead and flees in the care of an underground railroad, of sorts, to Canada. As a refugee, Moira is treated as a welcome guest north of the border. The scene begins with a camera shot from behind her that pans closer; Moira is seated at a table with a warm winter coat on. A Canadian case-worker sits down beside her, offers her coffee and something to eat. “Welcome to Ontario,” he says. “I wish it was under different circumstances, but we’re happy to have you here,” he continues. Moira looks stunned; no man has treated her so kindly in Gilead. The hospitable welcome continues: the case-worker asks if Moira has any family in Canada, because they have a text message system that can notify all family members of her arrival. He then gives her a refugee I.D. card. He gives her an envelope with all her paperwork filled out. He gives her a cell phone, all paid up; he gives her money to help get her settled; he gives her a medical insurance card, a prescription drug card; he gives her a bag of clean clothes. She is overwhelmed by this Abraham-and-Sarah-type-of welcome. “Do you want more to eat?” he asks gently. “Do you want a book to sit somewhere quiet?” he asks. “Whatever you want,” he says.

Abraham and Sarah hospitality helps to soothe the horrors of a human being’s past. It goes the extra mile to treat a person as a welcome guest, like that hotel treated Chris Hurns’ family. And such hospitality has deep roots in Christian history. In today’s New Testament reading from Romans, St. Paul gives several shout-outs to hosts and guests among the early Christian network of churches. He begins by holding up a woman named Phoebe. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe,” he writes. English translators have for centuries mis-translated Phoebe’s official title in the churches. The Revised English Bible calls Phoebe the “good friend” of Paul. The New King James Bible calls her Paul’s “helper,” as does the Revised Standard Version. Our NRSV pew Bible translates the Greek word correctly, by calling Phoebe Paul’s “benefactor.” Phoebe financed Paul’s ministry; she was a wealthy, independent woman in antiquity, more than a mere good friend or a helper; she paid for the food on Paul’s table and the clothes on his back, and did so for many others in the early Christian movement. Paul goes on in this chapter at the end of Romans to greet several other people, and to convey their greetings to the Roman Christians: name after name of hosts and guests. And then, at the end of today’s reading, Paul gives a shout-out to a man named Gaius, calling him the “host to me and to the whole church.” A scholar friend of mine has pointed out in print that this is a mis-translation of Gaius’ role. Gaius wasn’t a “host,” argues my friend Rick; Gaius was a “guest.” The Greek word translated as “host” is the word “zenos,” where we get our word “xenophobia” from - the fear of others. The main reason for translating “zenos” as “guest” instead of as “host” is that the word in antiquity almost never meant host; it was almost always used to refer to a human being who was an “other,” an “outsider,” a “foreigner,” someone who visited instead of someone who hosted visitors. If my friend Rick is right about this, then Paul, in the midst of sending greetings and acknowledging many individuals by name at the end of this ancient letter, is highlighting one person in particular: perhaps Gaius was a recent visitor to the church; perhaps Gaius filled out a pew card; perhaps he entered the church on a Sunday morning with the stink of the world all over him, laden with burdens he needed support to carry; perhaps Gaius was gender fluid or queer; perhaps Gaius’ life was transformed when he entered those doors and was greeted with Abraham-and-Sarah-type hospitality. Maybe he was invited to a dish-to-pass meal after the service; maybe he was handed an invitation by a child after the children’s sermon, welcoming him to the communion table; maybe someone reached out to him personally during the Passing of the Peace; or, maybe those first century Christians greeted

him with an ancient version of the UCC's "no matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you - Gaiuses of the world - are welcome here!" Whatever it was, Gaius as a guest instead of as a host, put those early Christians to the test, in the words I began with this morning from Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister: "guests bring us to God," she said, "and guests bring the world in." Guests, she says, "place [the world] at our feet, and dare us to be who and what we say we are."

The prophetic call to us on this World Communion Sunday - the call to action - is found, I think, in those words: guests dare us to be who and what we say we are. "Without guests," writes Joan Chittister, "life here is just one more instance of securing ourselves in the midst of our people, our kind, our type. ... The guest," she says, "... stretches our hearts" Guests open us to the possibility, as Abraham and Sarah discovered, that God has come for a visit in the faces of the strangers in our midst and the guests at our doors. And guests challenge us to offer Abraham-and-Sarah-type hospitality instead of Sodom and Gomorrah's lack of hospitality. And it's a prophetic message for our country at this time: this time of "America first" ideology; this time of dismissing with the wave of a hand the stories of survivors; this time of locking little children in cages. This is Sodom and Gomorrah's fear of the other, not Abraham and Sarah's generous openness.

...Let me close this morning with a story told to me by a pastor friend. My friend once invited an immigrant from Germany to a healing service at his church. She was a student visiting for an academic year, and she had struggled to make connections. She attended the healing service where my friend lit a candle and said a prayer. He then passed the flame to another person, who passed it to another, and on it went. The German student's candle was also lit. But there was one person - a visitor, a guest - sitting in the back whose candle remained unlit. No one seemed to notice, except the German student. She got up from the pew walked to the back and lit the man's candle. After the service, my friend thanked the woman for her kindness, and asked her why she acted in this way. "Because he was forgotten," she said.

My takeaway from the story is the same takeaway that Chris Hurn in the Joshie the giraffe story had, which is this: welcoming a guest - showing hospitality to a guest - has ripple effects, and means that no one will be forgotten. Amen.