

## **“Be the Gift”**

*Luke 15:20-24, Luke 1:39-56*

**Seasons greetings!** If you're like many people I know, you may find the expression irritating. After all, it can seem like a way to avoid acknowledging Christmas. But however you feel about it, the phrase does convey an important truth: This is a season in which we have many opportunities to greet people – that is, to practice the virtue of hospitality. During the next few weeks, you will quite likely attend more parties, host more get-togethers, and take part in more social events that at any other time of the year. It's definitely a season for hospitality. And, of course, the Bible has a lot to teach us about this important virtue. Both of today's readings reflect some of the same basic principals about how to be a truly hospitable presence to others – whether they are close friends, family members, or even people with whom you've had a strained relationship.

Both readings call us to **greet people with heartfelt enthusiasm**. When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth could not have given her a warmer welcome! She was filled with the Holy Spirit, the baby in her womb leaped with delight – which must have been quite a sensation – and she let Mary know that she was thrilled and honored to receive her as her guest. Imagine how Mary would have felt to receive such a positive, affirming welcome. And this kind of welcome isn't to be reserved for special people like Jesus' mom – it's also for people who may not seem quite so divinely blessed. In our first reading, we see the prodigal son returning home. He has squandered his father's wealth and treated his family like garbage. But, having run out of options, he returns home to beg for mercy. You'd think his dad would give him a hard time! Imagine it was your child who behaved this way. You probably would not receive him or her warmly. But in the story, the father runs to the son, embraces him and kisses him. He greets him with heartfelt enthusiasm!

The way we greet people is an important part of hospitality. It sets the tone for our visit, and can shape things in either a positive or negative direction. When you greet someone warmly and enthusiastically, you convey the simple message that you are glad they are there, that you are happy to see them, that they are valued and regarded in a positive way. I knew one man, his name was Bob, who whenever he greeted someone, he'd get the biggest smile, and reach out with one of those two-handed handshakes where the person grabs your elbow and shakes your whole arm. Without fail, he welcomed you as if you were his oldest and dearest friend. With his body language and words of greeting, he left you with no doubt that he was really glad to see you! I always felt great after seeing Bob. On the other hand, there are some who aren't as skilled in the art of greeting people. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld once talked about the emptiness of greeting people with the question “How are you?” He said that people ask it without really wanting to hear the answer (which isn't necessarily true). Instead, he proposed greeting people with a simple nod of the head and the word, “Acknowledge.” It's a funny idea, until you realize that people often do greet each other with this level of indifference. This past Thanksgiving we went to visit my wife's family. Now, there has been some tension between the sisters in the past, so I wasn't surprised that the greetings weren't warmly enthusiastic. They were more in line with Seinfeld's “acknowledge.” When my sister-in-laws family entered, I'm not sure they even all said hello. It was an awkward visit. The

point is the way we greet people is very important because it sets the tone for all that follows. It either makes the other person feel secure and ready open to a deeper relationship, or leaves them feeling insecure and self-protective. The way we greet people - whether they are visitors in our homes, guests at church, or people we meet out in public – is very important. It either opens or closes the door to relationship. A warm, enthusiastic greeting is essential.

In our readings, we find a second aspect of hospitality - which is to **bleed people with words and actions of kindness**. Elizabeth showers Mary with words of appreciation. She tells Mary that she is honored by her visit – she doesn't even feel worthy of the privilege – and she pronounces words of blessing over Mary. In return, Mary expresses her profound gratitude for the way God is working in her life. You may not be prepared to address people with poetic verses of praise, but the idea of expressing appreciation for other people is important, however you do it. In the case of the father of the prodigal son, he said more with actions than he did with words. He ordered a special robe, ring, sandals and a feast for his son. He blessed his returning son with actions of kindness. Now you might wonder why it's important to go beyond a simple enthusiastic greeting, to actually finding a way to bless others. I think the answer can be found in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, in which we are told that God has created us in God's own image. Each one of us carries God's breath of life. In New Testament language, we are called Temples of the Holy Spirit. When you offer words or actions of blessing to another person, you are blessing a precious, unique work of our Creator; you are testifying to that person's inestimable worth as a child of God. You might say, "Well, they sure don't act like a precious child of God!" That may be true. But if no one recognizes their value, the odds are pretty low that they will live up to their potential. When we see and acknowledge the worth of another person, however, it can shape how they see themselves and how they behave.

There's a TV show called "The Cleaner" which is all about a former drug-addict's mission to help other addicts get clean. In one episode, he was trying to help a woman who saw herself in purely negative terms – she felt worthless and beyond redemption, seeing herself only as a drug-addicted prostitute with no redeeming characteristics. But each time she put herself down, The Cleaner responded with honest words of blessing. He was able to help her see that she still had value, and that she was worth saving. Those words of blessing made all the difference – the difference between life and death.

By blessing others with our words and actions, we are actually testifying to our faith in God's good creation, even if we don't use religious words. And this has the power to change people's lives. So, in practicing hospitality, if you want to really bless someone here are some things you can do: give them your full attention; ask them about themselves; listen to them; find something praiseworthy about them, let them know it. And if there is something special you can do for them – if you spot a way you can serve them, or if there is some tangible way you can express your care for them – do it. In so doing, you will build them up and make a positive difference in their lives. You will also grow in the image of God, who is the ultimate source of all blessings and good gifts.

Finally, we see in both stories the element of joy. Elizabeth is filled with joy just to be in Mary's presence. The father throws a big party to express his joy at his son's return. Part of hospitality is **enjoying the people** we are with. The gift of hospitality is not like following a checklist: item one, enthusiastic greeting; item two, bless them; item three, enjoy them. While the scriptures point us to some important elements of hospitality, it's really about relationship and joy rather than a list of tasks to perform. It may be hard for some of us to get this, especially if hospitality isn't our gift, or if we are more driven by ideas and tasks than relationships. But, when it comes down to it, no task or idea is more important than our relationship and fellowship as children of God. It's in relationship that we express our spiritual connection, and live in God's Kingdom. This takes some discipline – and I know I'm the last one to preach about it. Earlier I mentioned a Thanksgiving get together at my mother in law's house. To be honest, I didn't help overcome the awkwardness that day. I love to cook, so I spent the whole day cooking Thanksgiving dinner. By the time we finished eating, I was exhausted. Everyone else went to watch TV together, to laugh and enjoy being together. Me, I was so tired I just went to the bedroom and lay down. I spend all my energy on doing things, and left no energy for just enjoying the family. In retrospect, I can see that I really missed the point of being there at all. We didn't go there for the food; we went there for the family. Now, maybe you don't struggle with this kind of thing. But I'm willing to bet that at least a few of us here today get so distracted by all the tasks we have to perform that we don't leave ourselves enough energy to just enjoy each other. If that's not an issue for you – congratulations! If it is, I invite you to join me in trying to remember that the people are more important than the presents, the food, or any other task.

The most important lesson about hospitality is that the best gift we have to give anyone is the gift of ourselves: Our greetings, our blessings and kindness, our joy. It doesn't matter if your house is perfectly decorated, or perfectly dusted and cleaned; it doesn't matter if you burn the roast or don't put enough salt in the potatoes; it doesn't matter if you can't afford to buy someone a flat screen TV, I-phone, or robotic dog. You are the gift – so greet people with warmth and enthusiasm, bless them through your words and actions, and just enjoy being with them. This has the power to transform people's lives for the better, and that is what the gift of hospitality is all about. There is no more fitting way to acknowledge God's coming to live among us in the birth of Jesus Christ.