

11 Ord, Sunday C  
2 Sam 12:7-10, 13; Gal 2:16, 19-21; Lk 7:36—8:3  
Notre Dame Church (Michigan City, IN)  
June 17, 2007

Some years ago I remember sitting on a park bench with a friend in Louisville, Kentucky. It was an early summer evening. The leaves and grass were fresh and green. The temperature was in the comfortable mid-seventies. As we talked about things that were important to us—we were both Benedictine monks and priests—we watched the life of the park. A jogger might pass us every few minutes, then a walker. We could see couples and friends on benches or walking together: some were animated and intense in conversation, some were laughing, some appeared to be discussing problems. An old man pushed his handicapped wife in a wheelchair along the path. There were young people in love, and little children stooping down to pick a cloverleaf or dandelion and show it to mommy. There were people sitting alone gazing into a pond, reflective or sad. You could hear the cheers of young college guys playing softball on a distant field. Everything about the park was welcoming. Whatever your state of mind, age, ability or disability, you could see that the people there found comfort, joy, healing, and counsel in this place.

Overall, it seems we have grown self-absorbed today. Special places like parks, piazzas, or the natural world are not sought out as much for the soul-nourishment we need. We turn to medications, therapists, or self-help to deal with troubles instead of to the natural world, prayer, contemplation, or friendship. We need and yearn for hospitable environments.

In today's Gospel, Jesus goes to a man named Simon's house. One gets the feeling that it was one of those invitations that a person accepts out of duty rather than desire. Jesus is not given even ordinary hospitality at Simon's house—no bathing of his feet from the dusty road, or the kiss of welcome on both cheeks that is still customary in the Middle East. Jesus rubs it in a little bit with Simon—anointing with oil wouldn't have been

customary, but he points out that this sinful woman offers more hospitality than the host himself. Although Simon is in fact inhospitable to Jesus and to this woman who has sought Jesus out, Jesus himself becomes the hospitable host to both Simon and the woman. He tells Simon a story. He allows the woman to express her remorse through tears and ritual. He awakens the other guests to wonder who this Jesus is who “even forgives sins.” Jesus has turned a hostile environment into a welcoming one, a forgiving one. It becomes life-changing for everyone in the place.

Our culture has reduced hospitality to a series of polite courtesies and practices defined by Emily Post and Martha Stewart—how to present h’or d’oeuvres or fold napkins. That is not biblical hospitality.

Someone was telling a pastor about a friend who was suffering depression after being overlooked for a job promotion. “Have you invited him to come to church?” the pastor asked. “Are you kidding?” replied the man. “How would that help?”

It is a sad commentary on our church communities that people do not find them to be life-giving places. What, then, is hospitality? What makes a place or an event life-giving? What makes a community a place of welcome? The late spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, wrote a whole book about moving from hostility to hospitality. Hospitality is at the center of Jesus’ message. His inclusive table-fellowship with women, Gentiles, the sick, politicians, soldiers, and sinners was a primary irritant to the religious establishment. But what happened in these small communities who followed Jesus? People told their stories—stories of trouble, their love of God or loss of God, heartbreak, lost friendships, fear, sinful lives to earn a living, poverty, grief. People made themselves vulnerable and took risks. Jesus listened intently. People’s gifts were recognized. Burdens were shared. Resources were offered. Healing took place. God was praised.

And this model of community demonstrated by Jesus became the way of life of the Christian communities that formed after his death and

resurrection. A Christian community was a safe place, a healing place, and a loving place. Hospitality became a way of life personally and communally. “See how these Christians love one another” was the word on the street. There was no need for programs. This is the way Christians lived day in and day out. The community itself was the transforming power for members and nonmembers alike.

People are yearning for such accepting and spiritually fulfilling communities in our world today. Becoming open and welcoming and accepting is what it means to follow Christ. Let us put ourselves to the task of reflecting God’s kingdom here on earth.