

29 June, 2008
Fr. Richard L. Green

As you're aware, the readings we have on Sunday mornings go in a three-year cycle and therefore, the jokes you hear may well also go in a three-year cycle. But I assume that most of you have at least as much memory loss as I do, so they're always fresh!

And so we come to the reading from Genesis. And Abraham and Isaac were together and Abraham was gathering firewood and Isaac is working on his laptop... and he's very frustrated and lets out this groan of frustration and his dad says, "My son, what's the problem?" And he says, "I just can't seem to get an internet connection here, Dad, and I am so frustrated."

And so Abraham says, "I have something important I need to do up on the mountain today and if you'll come along with me and you'll carry this load of firewood, you might be able to get a connection up there." And so they collect the firewood, Abraham puts it on Isaac who grabs his laptop as he's going up, and they get up onto the mountain. Abraham says, "Well, I think this is a good spot." And he takes the load of firewood off and begins to stack it up. Isaac opens up his laptop and sure enough, he says, "Dad, I've got a wi-fi connection here. This is great!" So he goes to work on his laptop while his dad is working on stacking up this wood. Then Abraham hears this groan of frustration again. He says, "Son, what's the matter now?" Isaac says, "Well, I've got the connection, Dad, but my computer just doesn't have enough memory to download what I need to download."

Abraham pauses and says, "Don't worry, my son. God will provide the ram."

Amen.

And you won't have to hear that for another three years!

Well, at the early service I preached a completely different sermon but in our Bible Study before this service, the conversation was such that I just threw that one out. And so if this is even a little more nebulous than usual, it's because of that.

I wanted to really focus on the Gospel reading. Earlier I had all three readings involved, but I'm looking at this gospel from Matthew where Jesus is talking about **welcome**. And it seems like, well, *duh*. Of course you should welcome people.

But I think there is a lot in this little reading. He's not talking about welcome in a superficial way, but really an *acceptance of the other*. Not just into one's midst, but into one's life. And he says, "Whoever welcomes you – " these are the last words to his disciples before he sends them out into the mission field. He says, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." That's saying an awful lot, because what he is telling them is that they need to go out into the villages and look for someone who does in fact welcome them and who gives

them a place to stay and who feeds them. Because they are not just casual travelers; they are coming with the Good News. And what they bring to that community is important for that community and it is also important for them to be the bearers of this Good News.

Our conversation in Bible Study before this service really struck me of what it's like in this congregation now, today. Over the last few years there has been a remarkable influx of people into this congregation and I look out and I just - there's a bunch of ya! And something happened in our welcoming people into this congregation. There is a change that has happened.

The "making room" is not just sort of moving over on the pew and letting a newcomer sit down. It is an opening of heart and mind to receive what that person is bringing in. To *really* welcome them. To welcome what is being brought. These newcomers are not blank slates who show up at our door. These are people with ideas and experience. People with a spiritual journey all their own that has brought them to this place. And for those who are already here, whether it has been for fifteen minutes before this newcomer arrived or for forty years, there is still going to be a shake up that goes on every time a new person comes. And what that does is to keep us fresh and alive. And what I see being brought into this congregation is amazing. And the contribution all these people bring to the vitality and life of this parish is remarkable.

And then you talk to the people who are being welcomed. And you would think they were the only ones getting anything out of this. 'Oh, I'm so happy to be here. This is such a great congregation.' And [they] go on with this whole *thing* about their experience. And so what happens in the welcoming, the welcomer and the welcomed both are transformed. Both are changed, both receive as well as give. And what seems to happen is there is this spiritual growth and transformation and change that happens in the midst of all of this welcoming.

I was reminded by Kathleen in our gathering before the service about Maundy Thursday. This last Maundy Thursday, as is our custom, we had a table Eucharist around a "U" arrangement of tables in our Parish Hall. In the midst of our gathering, I saw a man come through the courtyard, looking in the windows. He had the look of one in need of some help. So, I went to the door and invited him in. He said he had heard there was a food distribution going on during the day and he was hoping to get some food. And I said, "Well, that's done for the day, but we're just sitting down to dinner here and if you'd like, you can join us." He said that he would. But with the tables arranged the way they were, there was, in a sense, a head table so that we could preside over the Eucharist from there and that was pretty much the only place there was any seating available. So, he came in and I showed him to a seat over to my right, where he sat between Kathleen, Aidan and I and Gary Lindstrom and Ann Long.

Now, he didn't look like the rest of us. He had prison teardrop tattoos down the corner of his eye. He had his hair piled up in dreadlocks. He had a very Mayan face, probably came from the Yucatan of Mexico. But he came in and he joined into first the meal, and

then the Eucharist, and then he came with us as we came over to the sanctuary and we stripped the altar and then took the elements, the Blessed Sacrament, back to the Altar of Repose in the Columbarium where he knelt at the Sacrament and he prayed. He then left to go to a shelter with another unexpected visitor who took him there.

It was not a setup. Some people thought that we had gotten him on purpose. That it was planned. Well, it might have been planned by somebody, but not by us!

And it was in that welcoming, and in that being welcomed, that transformation took place. There was a window which opened onto the Kingdom of God. I've never seen him again. I think he was on the road; that's the impression I had. I've never seen him again, but that evening remains in the hearts of many as something very special. Something beautiful. Something powerful. Somehow in that welcoming of the other, of welcoming someone who might well have not been welcomed elsewhere – that in that welcoming - we all were changed. Something of the Kingdom, something of the body of Christ, is made real in those moments. We show ourselves to be who it is we truly are.

In the midst of being over-everything'ed – just fill in the blank for yourself in your own life – we can be given a glimpse of some greater reality that doesn't really require very much of us. It requires the smallest of gestures, even a cup of cold water given to one of these little ones, but the rewards that we receive in those small acts simply come in and join us. It is this amazing opportunity for this greater reality to break in and ,if even for just a moment, to show us the reign of God. May we pay attention to those opportunities, because they present themselves all the time. Don't underestimate those small gestures and the significance they have in our individual lives and in the life of this parish and in the lives of those whom we welcome.

Amen.