

Tell Me Your Story: Homer and Hospitality

By Carla Arnell

“We’re never the ones to say whether we are welcoming” — so a fellow parishioner recently remarked. That humble acknowledgement of uncertainty about our congregation’s hospitality caught our rector’s attention and prompted her to reflect on what it means for a congregation to be welcoming, a matter of theological importance but also practical concern in these days of dwindling numbers for mainline congregations.

In a subsequent weekly letter, our rector concluded: “Being radically welcoming means embracing the Other and allowing ourselves to be changed, mutually transformed, in the process.” Her answer reminded us that accepting the Other is central to a church’s practice of hospitality, but her response also opened as many questions as it answered. What does it mean to *embrace* the Other? *Embrace*, after all, is a term of intimacy. By what means will that embracing happen and transform us?

As I think back to a Protestant church I attended for 20-plus years during the first half of my life and its example of hospitality, I remember a parish that was home to men and women, children and elderly, professors and factory workers, divorced, married, and single people, and people of different races and classes. It was a place where people were *welcome* to assemble alongside each other, regardless of the superficial differences that might otherwise divide them. Yet, true hospitality — radical welcoming — goes beyond the kindly tolerance of otherness that I fear we sometimes mistake for hospitality. In its fullest sense, true hospitality presses us not only to worship alongside, but also to embrace, the Other. And it’s the mysterious mechanism behind “embracing” the stranger that I find more clearly illustrated in the hospitality stories of an ancient Greek epic than in the welcoming practices of many contemporary Christian congregations.

Since those 20 years rooted in one particular church home, I’ve moved geographically and been either blessed or cursed to be something of a religious wanderer, visiting church after church in my quest for a new ecclesial home. As a result of that wandering, I’ve

had a chance to see what it means to be a stranger in different places. In almost every church, I’ve encountered congregations sincerely committed to hospitality — to making the stranger welcome. Parishioners wear nametags or ask newcomers to do so. Parishioners invite newcomers to sign a guest book. Parishioners flock to newcomers with hearty handshakes and words of welcome at the Peace. And, above all, parishioners direct newcomers to reception areas replete with donut and pastry treats, fruits, crackers, cheeses, coffee, lemonade, and other painstakingly prepared refreshments. Yet, amid all that hospitality, there’s one key ingredient of welcoming that has so often seemed to be missing, an element that was central to hospitality as the ancient Greek poet Homer envisioned it in *The Odyssey*, which I teach every year in my literature classes.

As a student, I remember dismissing Homer’s epic poem as just a story of extraordinary heroes, struggles with mythical creatures like the Cyclopes, and romantic encounters with glamorous seductresses such as Calypso or Circe — in other words, as a story very distant from my everyday life and moral concerns. But during the many years I’ve taught that text I’ve been increasingly impressed by it as a work of wisdom literature, with much to teach me as a Christian.

For those who are unfamiliar with the story or foggy about its details, the basic plot concerns the Greek hero Odysseus, who has been away fighting in the Trojan War for ten years and, for another ten years, trying desperately to return to his home in Ithaca. The story is one of wandering and estrangement in a number of ways: Odysseus must travel through many foreign lands during his journey, and his son, Telemachus, travels a parallel path through strange places in order to obtain news of his father. Through those quests of father and son, we learn what it means to be a good guest and hospitable host, for time and again Odysseus and Telemachus find themselves as guests at the mercy of a stranger’s hospitality.

Of course, the ancient Greeks supremely valued good hospitality, expressed particularly through the host-guest relationship. Because this early Greek world was

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a perilous one for travelers, the ancient Greeks placed great importance on the ability to establish a bond between host and guest, which would ensure the host's safety if he were ever a stranger in the guest's land. So sacred was the host-guest relationship that it even trumped political allegiances, as illustrated by the famous encounter between Glaucos and Diomedes in Homer's *Iliad*, when the two men, respectively a Trojan and Greek warrior, share the stories of their lineages and agree to lay aside arms because of the host-guest ties that, they discover, united their grandfathers in a special bond.

The host's special obligations to a stranger are memorably illustrated in a number of episodes in *The Odyssey*. When Odysseus is washed ashore in the beautiful, refined kingdom of Phaeacia after having been finally released from imprisonment by the nymph Calypso, he appears like a mountain lion — grizzled, scruffy, and terrifying. With that animalistic image, Homer emphasizes how war has transformed Odysseus into something Other, barely recognizable as human to the princess and her ladies-in-waiting who discover him on the shore.

Even in the face of that bedraggled appearance, Princess Nausicaa invites him back to the palace as her guest. There, the king of the realm, Alcinous, orders him to be bathed, reclothed, and treated to an elaborate banquet, where he is fed with the finest foods and regaled with stories told by a blind bard, Demodocus. Most importantly, though, King Alcinous pauses at a key moment during the evening banqueting and turns to Odysseus with a special request. "Tell me your story, stranger," he asks.

It is this deceptively simple moment that is the heart of the epic poem both structurally and morally. Structurally, it prompts the shift from third-person to first-person narration and precipitates the seminal story of how Odysseus came to be stranded on Calypso's island, the essential information readers have been yearning to learn. Morally, it places *the desire to know another person's story* at the heart of true hospitality. In Homer's culture, it is the height of courtesy to ask for a stranger's life story.

Herein lies the central lesson for Christian congregations. During my many years of being both a visitor and a congregational host, I've noticed that con-

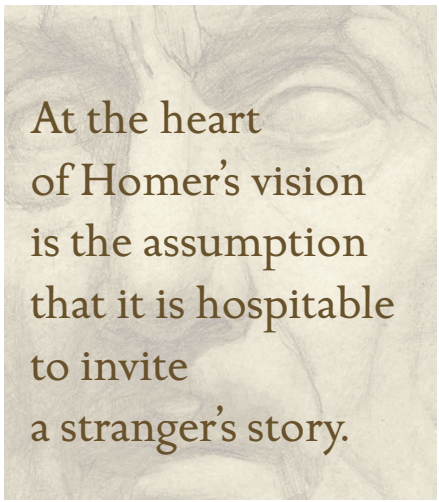
gregations tend to think of welcoming in terms of wearing name badges, shaking a visitor's hand, and offering a generous reception feast. Indeed, I was recently part of a congregation that was seemingly expert at such congregational welcoming. At the start of every service, the rector would ask those who considered themselves members of the congregation to rise in order to identify those who were strangers — those worshipers still seated. That ingenious process of identification led to hand-shaking and exchanges of names or good mornings. And yet, even after a year of being warmly greeted in that way, I still felt like an outsider in a sea of strangers, for beyond those morning pleasantries, few people asked for my story, nor was I courageous enough to seek out the stories of others.

What was missing there and in other congregational

initiatives to be welcoming is a willingness to cross boundaries of privacy and invite the stranger's story. My guess is that this reluctance to invite stories stems from a few different causes: our natural solipsism, our work culture, and our modern sense of politeness. Too often we are so caught up in our own thoughts and concerns that we don't push ourselves to be genuinely curious about other people, for real curiosity demands that we transcend our self-enclosed worlds and try to enter into someone else's world with empathy and interest.

Moreover, in the work world, for obvious legal reasons, we are typically trained *not* to ask strangers — job candidates, for instance — certain questions: Are you married? Do you have any children? What is your current salary? Perhaps we carry that workplace taboo about questioning the stranger to other contexts, including congregational ones. And last, I think we too frequently fear inviting the stranger's story because we don't want to intrude upon the person's privacy and ask things it's not polite to ask, given how politeness in contemporary culture has come to mean (when it means more than please and thank you) self-restraint and respect for other people's boundaries — a weak modern substitute for the richer sense of courtesy found in Homer's stories.

In that context, then, I suggest that Homer offers a welcome challenge to our Christian views about what it means to be hospitable. At the heart of Homer's vision is the assumption that it is hospitable to invite a stranger's story. Although this commitment to learning the stranger's story can happen informally in the op-



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opportunities for conversation before and after a worship service, it can happen in more formal ways as well. For instance, the church I attend has taken seriously this challenge to build a welcoming community by inviting the stories of its parishioners.

To that end, the traditional Bible study or topic-centered adult forums have, for a season, been replaced by a storytelling hour. Yes, every week during the season of Easter, a different parishioner holds court much as Odysseus did, as we gather in a circle and listen to that person's story — stories about the person's spiritual journey but also about the prosaic details. I have never found an adult forum to be time so well spent because those forums have taught me much that I didn't know about people I see every Sunday and know by name but otherwise don't really know. And in a sense I have found these adult forums to be "hospitality training," preparing us for those more informal congregational moments when we might invite the stranger's story or share ours.

As I think back to the innumerable parish coffee hours during which I've found myself looking across at strangers as if across an abyss, I realize that those empty moments of feeling not welcome transpired because no one (including me) posed the basic question: What is your story? If radical welcoming really means "embracing the Other and allowing ourselves to be changed, mutually transformed, in the process," the mechanism for that transformation is story. Through story, we are brought into deeper relationship with each other. Only through this exchange of stories will we know and be known — and fulfill what it means to be a community of welcome.

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