

The Greatest Virtue and the Greatest Sin

June 18, 2023

Every Sunday, we hear readings from the Bible. The Bible is not as much a book as it is a library, a collection of writings that were recorded between 4000 and 1500 years ago. Today, I'd like to share a story from a piece of writing that is roughly the same age as parts of the Bible.

This is the opening scene from *The Odyssey*, an epic poem written down around 3000 years ago.

The *Odyssey* tells the story of a Greek warrior named Odysseus. He has fought in the Trojan War, and he is making a long, convoluted journey to his homeland. But the story begins in a strange way.

It begins with an account of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, a young man who is around 20 years old and who is tending his father's house while his dad is away.

One evening, a stranger shows up at the gate of the house. The house is full of uninvited, rude suitors who are trying to woo Telemachus' mother. In the hubbub of the crowd of men, this stranger at the gate almost goes unnoticed.

But Telemachus sees him and rushes over to the door, mortified at the idea that a guest should be kept waiting at the gate. Telemachus lets the man in, shakes his hand, and says, "Welcome to my house. Come in and eat, and then we'll talk."

Telemachus then takes the stranger's coat and weapons and leads him into the house. He directs the guest to a richly decorated chair at the dinner table and prepares a place setting for him. Servants bring a gold pitcher of water and silver basin to wash their hands, and then a feast of rich foods and meat is served. As the men eat, a musician begins to sing and play.

Only after the stranger has been washed, fed, and entertained does Telemachus ask who the man is and why he has come.

The two men talk about Odysseus and the future of the house. After giving some advice, the stranger disappears in a flap of wings, and Telemachus realizes that his visitor was none other than the goddess Athena in disguise.

The story begins with this scene for a reason. If we know nothing about Odysseus, if we have no idea who the good guys and bad guys are in the story, from this story we are oriented to the fact that this man Telemachus is an admirable man. He has done what any righteous human being would do: he has offered hospitality to a stranger. And not only did he offer food, lodging, and entertainment to this visitor, but he gave the best that he had. That fact tells us as listeners that he is a one of the heroes of this story.

Our story from Genesis functions in the exact same way. We met Abraham in our readings last week (though he was "Abram" at that point - God had not given him a new name yet). All we heard was that God promised to bless him, but we didn't get to know Abraham at all. As it turns out, over the next couple weeks, we'll hear various adventures of Abraham and his descendants.

Today we hear an introduction to the character of Abraham. And this story is almost identical to the opening scene of *The Odyssey*.

Instead of the goddess Athena, we have the Lord God who visits, appearing in the guise of 3 men, who visit Abraham and his entourage at their camp near a stand of oak trees. Abraham runs to meet them (a very undignified act), bows down to the ground, and welcomes them. He has his servants prepare a rich meal, and Abraham himself serves it to them.

So if you and I were residents of the Middle East living 3000 years ago, and we heard this story, we would say, “That Abraham is a class act. He offers the highest level of hospitality even to strangers. He should be blessed for his actions.” And of course, as we hear, he and Sarah are told that they will bear a son, as a reward for their righteousness.

The truth is that, whether you lived in ancient Greece, ancient Israel, or any civilization a couple millennia ago, hospitality would have the highest priority of your society. Today we value independence and capability, creativity and a strong work ethic. If you have those things, you are a mensch.

But it used to be hospitality. Simply put, if you were a gracious host – or a considerate guest – then you had the respect of both your fellow citizens and of any divine beings.

That’s an important context that also comes into play in our Gospel story. Jesus goes out and teaches and heals people. Then he sends out twelve of his followers to go and do the same.

And he gives them specific instructions. No money. No extra clothes. No other possessions in a bag. You have to be wholly dependent on the hospitality of others. That’ll teach you about mercy and kindness.

It’s one thing to give to people in need. It’s another to throw yourself at the mercy of others, to receive charity, and then give to people in need. You have a much better sense of how to act and what is appreciated. So that’s what Jesus tells his 12 apostles to do.

There is one word in there though, in Jesus’ instructions, that needles me a bit. It makes me a little uneasy. It’s that word “worthy.” “Whatever town you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.”

Is it up to the disciples to say, “You are worthy; you are not?”

But this is another place when we see the importance of hospitality. “Worthy” simply means that the residents of that house or town welcome the disciples and give them food and lodging.

I find some comfort in that.

- Being worthy has nothing to do with mistakes you’ve made in the past (as our tax collector showed us last week).

- Being worthy has nothing to do with being ritually clean or in good standing in your faith community (as the hemorrhaging woman showed us).
- Being worthy has nothing to do with what you've accomplished in your life (as the young girl showed us).

What determines whether you are worthy is simply how you treat strangers. How do you welcome them? How do you provide for them? How do you serve them?

And the negative example is Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not any kind of romantic preference; it was their failure of hospitality. They tried to attack (and abuse) guests who came to their city and were under their care. Then because of their heinous crime of violating the law of hospitality, because they attacked the people they should have been serving, they were punished.

Jesus says, "That is the fate of any house that fails to respect those who come seeking help."

(As a side note, in *The Odyssey*, there are people who commit a similar crime of denying hospitality, and they are also destroyed by the gods.)

On the flipside, if the disciples are received with hospitality, people are cured. Lives are changed. The kingdom of heaven comes near.

I don't think that's a quid pro quo; as in, "If you do these things, God will bless you." It's a simple cause-and-effect. If you welcome people with open arms and open doors, joy abounds. Suspicions disappear. Peace and trust grow. And the world becomes a bit more hopeful.

By the same token, if you turn people away, if you fail to see that their livelihood is your livelihood, then disaster follows. Walls go up. Trust evaporates. And soon, communities destroy each other from within.

It's a pretty jarring call from Jesus to his disciples. And like anything that Jesus calls us to do, it takes time. It takes intentionality, to look for opportunities when we can welcome people in our lives. We don't have a culture of hospitality anywhere, when we are bound by a social contract to feed strangers who come to our houses and give them a place to sleep.

But think about the strangers you encounter on a daily basis: the driver of the car ahead of you in traffic, your neighbor you see walking down the street, the person sitting in the booth next to you at the restaurant, the person in the pew behind you whom you don't know.

There are lots of opportunities to welcome and serve strangers. If we can do that, then we usher in the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.