

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – July 2, 2017
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I grew up in the High Point Terrace neighborhood of East Memphis, on a street called Aurora Circle. Actually, both Father Dennis Schenkel and I grew up on that street. My late father used to say with some pride that he didn't know what other streets in Memphis were doing for vocations, but that Aurora Circle was doing its part. In addition to our role in promoting vocations, Aurora Circle boasts one of the oldest continuous Fourth of July parades in the city – over 65 years now. When I was growing up – in the earliest years of the republic – we children in the neighborhood used to decorate our bicycles or tricycles or wagons with red, white and blue crepe paper and ride around the circle waiving at our neighbors who dutifully sat in their front yards to watch. There were about thirty children participating each year – sometimes 40, I suppose. Some years ago, such neighborhood celebrations moved from quaint to fashionable and participation dramatically increased. These days there are so many people walking along or riding in antique cars or flatbed trailers that the parade almost meets itself on our small little circle. And there is almost no one left to watch the parade from the sidelines anymore – everyone is joining in. Now, if you listen to those who have lived on the street for decades, you will hear quite a few comments – this year's parade is probably the biggest ever! Where did all of these people come from? This used to be a neighborhood parade, most of these people don't live anywhere near here. Yes, often in the same conversation, the neighborhood crowd is both celebrating the tremendous popularity of the parade and lamenting how much it has changed. Aurora Circle is hospitable to these once-a-year visitors, but you can't really say that some of the old guard are truly welcoming. Change, even after thirty years, is difficult.

Our readings today remind us of the value of hospitality and welcome. Elisha was welcomed into a couple's home because they could recognize his holiness. Yes, he asked God to reward the woman's hospitality – but Elisha had been welcomed without any expectation of return. In the gospel, Jesus is continuing his instructions to the disciples before he sends them out on their first foray into ministry. In last Sunday's gospel, he told them not to be afraid, that God would always care for them – in this world or in the next. Today, he blesses those who receive them – whether as a prophet, or as one who is righteous, or even as a poor little one in need of a cup of water. For their part, the disciples are strongly encouraged to be detached – to leave family and comfort behind, to take up their cross, to willingly surrender their life. These new disciples are sent forth with no guarantee of welcome and, indeed, are encouraged not to seek it out.

As one new to the parish, I must tell you that it is difficult to preach on welcome and hospitality on the weekend when I am being welcomed. It seems a little self-serving. Indeed, it seems almost desperate. Nonetheless, a few of you might be saying under your breath – well, Father, prove yourself. Let's see how you carry your cross – and ours too – before we decide whether to fully welcome you. In effect, we are sometimes like my friends from Aurora Circle on Independence Day – we are hospitable enough to our guests, but we remind ourselves – and sometimes we remind them – that they are indeed our guests. It is human nature to want to get to know someone before fully welcoming them. The woman of influence who welcomed Elisha had dined with him several times before arranging for him to be a guest in her family home. Jesus praised those who welcomed the disciples because they saw them as prophetic or righteous – and they had to have at least encountered them in order to discern those qualities. So some period of acquaintance is to be expected – but today's readings, I suggest to you, are meant to remind us that at the outset we must be *open* to welcoming others, we must be *open* to an encounter with someone who may indeed be prophetic, to someone who may indeed be righteous, to someone who may indeed need our kindness. We must *open* our hearts and our lives to an encounter with God.

That, you see, was what Elisha and Jesus and the disciples were offering to those whom they encountered. That is what God offers us in each and every person we meet – an encounter with a child of God, with one made in his image and likeness. And it is what God offers us each time we come to him in prayer – but we must be open to receiving God's grace in order to benefit from that encounter. We can, of course, be outwardly hospitable to God – going through the motions without actually receiving him, without actually welcoming him into our hearts. We can be outwardly charitable and kind without fully embracing the living God who wants only to love us. Too often, we recognize that if we keep God at a distance, if we retain a few walls in our hearts – well, then we won't hear God's call to change. If I don't let God into my heart, for example, then I can feign being compassionate while I am still largely consumed by greed. If I don't let God into my home, then I can be perfectly moral when others are watching and do what I want when the doors are closed. If I don't let God into my life, then I can use God as an insurance policy – coming to him when I need that cup of water that Jesus talks about in the gospel, but swimming away when I have all the water that I think I need. In short, we are challenged not just to be hospitable to God, but to be fully welcoming as well; not to see God as an ATM whom we only visit when our reserves are low, but as our loving and gentle companion who wants to guide and support us in good times and in bad. Today and every day, Jesus challenges us to open our hearts to his divine presence, to welcome his love and mercy and to allow Jesus to conform our frail human heart to his most sacred heart.