

**Testing, testing...** *No*, not COVID testing – FAITH testing!! Our Old Testament reading begins with “God **tested** Abraham.” And it was a shocking test, indeed. I think Abraham’s faith was greater than mine would have been if it were me being asked to sacrifice my son. All’s well that ends well, though, and thankfully Isaac was spared. Abraham passed the **test** of faith.

I wonder, when we consider what Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, whether we understand what a **test** it truly is to our faith. I’m referring to the challenge of being welcoming – the challenge of hospitality. It’s a **test** not only to our faith, but to our humanity.

“The Episcopal Church welcomes you” the signs read on the front of our denomination’s buildings. “You’re welcome,” we reply when people say “Thank you.” Many people have “Welcome” written on their front doormat. “Welcome in,” the salesperson calls out as you enter virtually any store in America. But is everyone really welcome? “Welcome” is meaningless unless accompanied by a true attitude of hospitality.

There are many passages in scripture that speak of welcome and hospitality. From Isaiah 57: “Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own?” In Hebrews 13: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The call to welcome the stranger was always part of the measure of the Jewish community’s faithfulness to God and the same was true in early Christian communities.

There is a potential downside to this, though, isn't there? Travelers in most biblical examples were often **strangers** – *foreigners* who ate different foods, wore different clothes, spoke different languages and even worshipped different gods. Showing hospitality by opening your home to strangers was *and is risky* – would we consider that to be a fair test of our faith these days?

Today in America we'd probably describe such a thing as naïve and dangerous - we have a fear of the stranger that is sometimes irrational and sometimes warranted. But such hospitality was central to Ancient Jewish and early Christian identity. They recognized hospitality as a tenet of God's character, who is open to welcoming all. Indeed, in today's gospel reading, we see that God rewards those who are *welcoming* and showing hospitality.

But what are **we** doing? For the past two or three centuries, American Christians seem to have had a problematic **blind spot** when it comes to God's call to **hospitality** - in *welcoming* "the other," the homeless, the stranger and the foreigner. I'm thankful that it seems like now, many Americans are waking up and learning about the damaging legacy that results from an **oppressive** relationship with "the other."

I heard a wonderful **story** the other day of **hospitality** and full-circle *redemptive welcome*. Robert Hartwell, an African-American Broadway star who appeared in productions such as Hello, Dolly! and Motown the Musical, announced last Wednesday that he bought a house in Massachusetts **that was built by slaves**, as a way to reclaim it and "fill it with love" in honor of his ancestors.

Hartwell recounts how he called the seller and was told it was a cash only offer and the person on the phone said, 'I'm sure that takes you off the table,'" But Hartwell didn't let that comment deter him from purchasing the home. He said, "The house was built in 1820 for the Russell family who owned the cotton mill in town. Slavery was still legal. When the agent asked me why I wanted such a large house I said it was 'a generational move.'" Hartwell went on to explain that he wanted to purchase the house as a way to pay tribute to those who built it, saying, "I wish I could've told my ancestors, when they were breaking their backs in 1820 to build this house, that 200 years later a **free gay black** man *was going to own it* and fill it with **love** and find a way to *say their name* even when 200 years later they still thought I would be 'off the table.'" Now, "We are building our own tables. I've never been prouder to be a black man," he added. "Come to my White House any time. I can't wait to have you! Glory to God in the highest. *I'm a homeowner.*"

For far too long, Christians used the bible to *justify* slavery. Part of the problem is that Paul, who wrote so many of the Epistles in the New Testament, never spoke out against slavery **but often used it** in his writings, just as *a matter of fact*. It's shocking that something as awful as slavery was just *a normal part of life* back then. I don't think that Paul was justifying or condoning slavery, though, because as he writes to the Galatians he says **there is no longer slave nor free**, but all are one in Christ Jesus. Slavery *was* a fact of life but that doesn't mean Paul thought it was a GOOD fact of life. We don't really know. Whatever the case was *then*, God calls us *now* to work **for justice** even when it's uncomfortable or hard to understand. We set ourselves free to righteous justice as we put our lives into God's hands.

It's hard for those of us who have never been oppressed *or colonized* to understand how the pain of oppression can be passed from generation to generation. And as a white person, I'm sure I don't fully understand the strong feelings of **people of color** who are responding to injustice now in our time. It has taken *centuries* for Christianity to recognize that slavery is antithetical to **welcome**, or **hospitality**. I hope and pray it doesn't take much longer before the lingering effects of **racial injustice** are fully *admitted* and *reconciled*. It's as if we are undergoing a **test** of our humanity. Do we really believe that all people were created equal? I don't hold the solution to these issues, but *I know* we need to **keep talking** and **keep searching** for greater understanding and love.

The **test** of *our faith* and *our humanity* today lies in how we offer **welcome** and **hospitality** *to Christ*, who has always been found in the stranger, in the thirsty, in the hungry, in the refugee, in the enslaved, and in our neighbor, of every color. I pray we may pass the test. Amen.