

Apparently, Saddleback Church in California is famous for its hospitality, the church welcomes strangers as guests instead of as visitors. "The term 'visitor' implies that they're not here to stay," writes pastor Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose-Driven Church*. "The term 'guest' implies that this is someone for whom you do everything you can to make them feel comfortable." For a guest, we do everything. For a visitor, not so much.

A staff member there leads a "guest services team" that's in charge of first impressions -- they're determined to be good hosts to the strangers who come to them. Traffic attendants are trained to welcome people and point them toward the worship venues, greeters are positioned along walkways to welcome people and answer questions, and ushers are available to respond to people and seat them. The goal is that each guest will receive a total of three greetings before sitting down in worship. These first impressions are critical. Warren writes that he believes that guests "are deciding whether or not to come back long before the pastor speaks."

Stranger. Guest. Host. All three roles are taken seriously at Saddleback Church, and all three roles are played by Jesus himself on the road to Emmaus in our gospel from Luke this morning. He appears to his disciples first as a stranger, then as a guest, and finally as a host, offering critical guidance to any of us who want to do a better job of welcoming and including people in the life of the church.

Today our story begins with two disciples traveling to the village of Emmaus on Easter afternoon. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, the risen Jesus appears and begins to walk with them and for some reason their eyes are kept from recognizing him. Perhaps this is because Jesus wants to have a serious conversation with these disciples and he knows that if he reveals himself to them he would be bombarded with questions. Maybe it was because he wanted to teach them something and he knew they would be too distracted by the miracle of his Resurrection to truly pay attention to what he had to say. Whatever the reason for

keeping them temporarily in the dark, Jesus begins to ask them about the events they're discussing, and one of them says, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

This question initially depicts Jesus as a stranger, giving his disciples the challenge of showing hospitality. They practice *philoxenia*, which literally means "love of the stranger." *Philoxenia* is one of the Greek words used in the New Testament for hospitality. This approach stands in stark contrast to the attitude so prevalent in our society these days -- *xenophobia*, "fear of the stranger."

Which begs the question, what would it mean for us to practice *philoxenia* in our congregational life? We do it every time we speak to strangers after worship, instead of chatting only with our friends or family members. We do it every time we make an effort to get to know a person from a different race, culture, nationality or sexual orientation. This is *philoxenia* -- love of the stranger. When we practice it, we discover that strangers aren't really so strange.

Fortunately, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus rise to this challenge. As they come near the village that is their destination, Jesus walks ahead as if he is going on. But the disciples urge him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So Jesus goes in to stay with them, and he becomes their guest. They welcome and include him in their lives, and invite him to stay with them.

Similarly, Jesus wants us to take good care of the guests who come to us. He challenges us to feed the hungry and welcome outcasts as he did throughout his ministry. Since we as members of the church are the physical body of Christ in the world today, we're supposed to be his hands and continue his work. We show his presence in the world every time we practice hospitality in his name, whether we're feeding the hungry through a food pantry or welcoming a guest to a worship service. Guests are important to Jesus, which is why he played that role on the road

to Emmaus. He wanted to challenge his followers to see him as a guest and to take good care of him.

There's a scene in the gospel of Matthew that stresses the importance of this kind of care. In the final judgment of the nations in Matthew 25, Jesus announces that he frequently appears to us as a guest. Specifically, he comes in the form of people who are in need of food, drink and a warm welcome. He says to his followers, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The followers of Jesus hear these words, but they're confused. They don't remember seeing Jesus and helping him, so they ask, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry ... thirsty ... a stranger?" Jesus answers them simply, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Jesus comes to us as a guest, even today. When we help a person in need, we're really helping Jesus. And this happens not only in church, but on the street, in school and in the workplace. This can be tough to do at the office, because the workplace has become such a competitive and anxious place, with everyone forced to do more with less. But even there, when you help a person in need, you're helping Jesus. As an ancient poem called "The Gaelic Rune of Hospitality" says so well: *I saw a stranger yesterday; I put food in the eating place, Drink in the drinking place ... Often, often, often, Goes Christ in the stranger's guise.*

But notice what happens next on the road to Emmaus. Jesus, the stranger, becomes a guest of the disciples when he accepts their invitation to stay. But then he quickly changes roles. When he's sitting at the table with them, he becomes their host -- he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. Then their

eyes are opened and they recognize him -- and he vanishes from their sight. Like Abraham and Sarah, who practiced hospitality by the oaks of Mamre in the book of Genesis, the disciples discover that, when they welcome a stranger, they welcome the Lord.

The role of Jesus changes from stranger, to guest, to host, when he sits at the table and breaks the bread. This transition continues to happen today, when the risen Christ nourishes us through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. As the bread is broken, we're invited to open our hearts to the presence of Christ. He's comes to feed us, and to fill us with his power and his presence.

It's critically important for us to permit Jesus to be our host; to eat his bread, drink his cup and allow his body and blood to become part of our own body and blood; to accept the forgiveness he offers and to allow ourselves to be strengthened and inspired. But sometimes, it's easier for us to help others than to receive help. We would rather be a host than let someone else be a host. But, at the Lord's Supper, permit Jesus to be your host. Open yourself to what he wants to give you. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, your eyes will be opened and you'll recognize him.

Our story ends with the two disciples racing back to Jerusalem to share the news of their experience with the other disciples. They tell them what happened on the road, and how Jesus "had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread." Their message is a proclamation, and it's something we're all challenged to do. To make a proclamation is simply to talk about how we've experienced the activity of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in our lives. Of course it's going to be different for all of us, and differences are just fine, because diversity is to be expected in a church that is considered to be and thought of as a home for all.

Pope Francis has stirred up the Roman Catholic Church since his selection, gaining particular attention for working to make the church "the home of all." In a

recent interview, he talked about proclamation and Christian hospitality.

"Proclamation ... focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things," he said. "This is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus."

It is good the pope mentioned Emmaus, because this is where Jesus came to his disciples as a stranger, as a guest and as a host. Emmaus is where we learn how to welcome one another around a table, and then go out into the world with a proclamation. Emmaus is where we come together and strengthen our bonds with Jesus and with each other. And when we practice Christian hospitality, we become part of a mighty spiritual movement -- one that can overcome divisions in a terribly polarized world. This is possible because every time Jesus breaks the bread, he opens our eyes so that we may recognize him so that we might help others to recognize him through our forgiveness, love, and service. Amen. Thanks be to God.