I’m sure this will shock you, but when I tell people what I do, I often hear, “but you don’t look like a priest!” or some variation on “but you’re too young / blonde / nice / happy / woman-y / open-minded / something-else.” At a dinner with some friends soon after my ordination, I reconnected with someone with whom I had frequently gone to yoga before leaving for seminary, and over a plateful of pasta she laughed, “I can’t believe you’re a priest now. You’re so not Churchy!”

Now I think she meant this as a compliment, but it was already dawning on me that these comments had nothing to do with me and everything to do with other people’s assumptions about Christianity. So I laughed. And I said something like, “I hear you. Being a priest still surprises me, too. But here’s the thing. I’m a priest. It is actually hard to be any Churchier than I am. I am the definition of Churchy. I love God. I strive to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I’m kind of obsessed with scripture. And I still do yoga and triathlons and go hiking and love nature. I still learned most of what I know about meditation from Buddhist monks and, no, I don’t have to be shy about that. I still believe in evolution and shop local and go to therapy. I’m still silly and stubborn and I make mistakes and I practice saying sorry. All of these things are true and I’m a priest. So if any of that implies I’m not ‘Churchy,’ I’d really appreciate you rethinking what you mean by that.” Somehow I managed to say this without offending my friend, who actually appreciated it and responded, “I guess the Church has always seemed patriarchal and condescending and stuffy and disconnected to me. But I hear you. I’m going to think about this.”

This makes me wonder what people thought when they opened the door and saw two of Jesus’ disciples standing before them: no bread, no bag, no money; wearing only a simple tunic and belt, a staff in hand and sandals on their feet. Would they have had any reason to recognize them as spiritual leaders? As religious people? As revolutionaries? As people carrying Good News – the best news – to the world? Certainly, on first impression, they wouldn’t have brought to mind the High Priests of Israel. For centuries, religious leaders had been well ensconced in the temple, more concerned with erudite teaching and ritual piety than the people around them. And
for centuries those religious elites had colluded with the government – at that time, the Roman Empire – to amass enormous wealth by exploiting the poor and the land. And so, we can imagine priests would have been dressed in fine fabrics, not scratchy cloth; covered in costly jewelry, carrying purses filled with coins bearing the face of Caesar. Probably the high priests seemed patriarchal, condescending, stuffy, and disconnected, too.

I’d have to guess that those who answered the knock on their door, or heard the voice from the threshold of their tent, didn’t know what to make of the disciples. Perhaps wandering ascetics seeking to purify themselves with strict religious discipline and voluntary poverty. There’s a lot of that going around these days. Or the ancient equivalent of hippies wandering in their organic burlap sacks and gently used Birkenstocks, begging for a meal (vegan, please) and trying to live off the grid. Or maybe – fingers crossed – they come with a smile and some samosas hidden behind their backs, wanting only a donation in the name of one good cause or another.

We tend not to have the best of associations today with uninvited guests, particularly or the religious sort, but in ancient times notions of home and privacy would have been different from our own, and there would have been important customs around hospitality. Some deep, even unconscious, sense of how to welcome a friend or a stranger with kindness and decency, no matter who they were or why they came. Not too long ago even here in America such unspoken codes existed, and in certain parts of the country they still do.

So perhaps those ancient hosts wouldn’t have been as bewildered by a passerby, but it is worth wondering about what this way of spreading the Gospel says about God and about us. Remember that God is, well, God, which means that God could share the good news being revealed in Jesus’ life in whatever way God would choose. God could have given every human being a vision or a dream which addressed every singly one of our deepest fears and doubts and longings, right? But God didn’t do that. God desired to share something with us, which means God would have chosen the most effective way possible to accomplish it, and instead of trying to upload good news directly into the lonely spaces of our hearts and minds, God came as a person. A living, breathing, complicated, surprising person. And in so doing God entered into relationship with us. A dynamic, transformative, ongoing relationship.

There was no one time only, static, frozen in time character to what God was sharing, because freezing a truth in time truth would mean that whatever God was sharing would have to
be less than God – smaller than God – and what God sought in Jesus was nothing less than to know us and be fully known by us in return. Think about a lifelong friendship or your relationship with your spouse. The fullness of who another person is something that is always being revealed to us, which means they remain, always, a mystery, someone who can surprise and delight us, someone who changes us, and changes with us. Apparently, God wanted that kind of intimate, dynamic, transformative – and, sure, occasionally frustrating - relationship with us, and figured the best way to accomplish that was to entrust the good news of God’s love and the in-breaking Kingdom to us. It’s kind of breathtaking.

So God comes into the world in Jesus. And Jesus makes some really close friends. And then he sends them into the world to make more friends. Not to knock on people’s doors with the ancient equivalent of glossy brochures and a compelling sales pitch, but to actually enter into relationship with them. Think – really think – about what this says about how God remakes the world: not with a grand vision or sweeping statement, but person to person, in the awkward interactions between people who are just getting to know each other, the clumsy customs – would you like lemonade or water? cookies or coffee cake? – and gently spoken words of invitation that blossom into connection and laughter, all uttered on lumpy couches over baba ghanough, warm pita, and sweet wine. All we have to do is make room in our homes and our hearts for the person before us.

The risk, of course, is not so much that the strangers we encounter in our own lives – not necessarily standing on the stoop but at the grocery store, in the office, begging along the roadside, sleeping on the park bench - will actually harm us. No, no. The threat of violence or even rudeness is alarmingly low. The risk is that talking with them, getting to know them, making room for them, will change us. Welcoming them will change us. Because every person we meet changes us. And so, welcoming a stranger, practicing hospitality, we will never be the same, and most of the time we would rather not take the chance of being changed. But change, well, change is what God is all about. The hardest part, really, is believing this is, itself, good news: that being changed is not the end of our life but the beginning of a new one.

The discipline of hospitality is so transformative that it is commended repeatedly in both our scripture and the traditions of the Church. Think of St. James (Hebrews 13): “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Or the Rule of St. Benedict, the most widely-used rule for monasteries in the Middle Ages, which
holds hospitality as a cornerstone, meaning that at the very least, when people had nowhere else to go, they could retreat to religious houses and be welcomed with dignity and kindness, no questions asked. Our history is full of people whose lives have been transformed by either offering or receiving hospitality – like St. Francis and every single one of his followers – but here’s a tale from our own times.

In 2010, Derek and Matthew arrived at New College, a public liberal arts college in Sarasota, Florida, both eager freshman, and were assigned to the same dorm. Derek lived a floor down from Matthew and, though they didn’t know each other well, they sometimes ran into each other in common spaces where Derek would play country songs on his guitar and Matthew would join in singing. A few months into the year, and news spread across campus that Derek came from one of the most prominent white nationalist families in America. His own father had founded the first and largest white power website and his godfather was David Duke, an outspoken and notorious white supremacist. Derek himself was immersed in the movement and had, for years, led conferences about the supremacy of the white race and coordinated marketing and media responses for the organization.

As this news spread, Matthew saw other students recoil from Derek, even try to make his life as miserable as possible, and he figured that was just not going to change anything. Matthew was a devout orthodox Jew, and Derek’s ideology held that Jews like him were part of a massive global effort to take over the world, but he, nevertheless, sent Derek a text and invited him to come to the Shabbat dinner he was in the habit of hosting each Friday night. It was an incredible act of hospitality. And, just as incredible, Derek came. Matthew made very clear to his other friends that this was not an opportunity to grill Derek on his beliefs, or argue with him, or try to convince him of how wrong he was. It was, instead, an opportunity to welcome him, to feed him, and for everyone to get to know each other.

Derek was used to defending himself and his family. Sophisticated. He was also a true believer. But put in a position where he didn’t have to defend himself, Derek started to listen, week after week, and, much to his surprise, he slowly came to care for the people around the table. At one point another regular at the Shabbat dinners did ask Derek to explain his beliefs, and Derek assumed she would be persuaded by it, since it all made so much sense to him. But

1 This story can be found in greater detail at https://onbeing.org/programs/how-friendship-and-quiet-conversations-transformed-a-white-nationalist-may2018/#comments.
because they were friends she was able to point out inconsistencies he couldn’t see, and he was able to hear her. Like if white supremacy was all about just caring for their own, why all the activism to demonize others? Why even bother denying something so obviously real as the holocaust? If it is only about protecting your own, why not leave the rest of the world out of it?

Matthew says it took two years before he had any inkling that Derek’s beliefs were changing, and during that entire time he kept inviting him back to the next Shabbat dinner. Imagine it – two years! But eventually the two friends began to talk about politics, and race, and history, and slowly Derek changed … Derek allowed himself to be changed … and he renounced the movement, and has since become an outspoken advocate against it.

This is the power of hospitality, because when we come before another person, so vulnerable - with no bread, no bag, no money, the usual things that can confuse us into thinking we don’t need each other – when we lead with our need, our dependence, being welcomed is so much more than a relief. It is salvation. It is everything. And doing the welcoming is, too. May we be so courageous. So open to being changed and surprised. So filled with hope and Good News. Amen.