

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC **July 21, 2019**
16th Sunday of Year C **Genesis 12:1-10a**

People who have visited the Middle East often comment on the sense of hospitality, of welcome, they received from so many of the people they met there, whether they be Muslim, Jewish or Christian. It is part of the culture of the region going back to Biblical times. It is also at the core of today's first reading from the book of Genesis, and is a theme that pervades both the Old and New Testaments---this notion of providing a welcome for "the stranger." Back in ancient times, given the severe hot climate in that part of the world, if a stranger appeared at one's door--someone never seen before and likely never to be seen again, but someone tired and thirsty after a long journey--that stranger depended upon his host's hospitality for survival, or the refusal of hospitality might well mean a return to the desert sun and certain death. So, among the Jews one of the most serious of sins was to refuse hospitality. For the Hebrews it was a moral imperative to welcome whoever appeared at the entrance of one's home.

The obligation to offer hospitality had a rather paradoxical aspect about it, as well, for as the Spiritual Fathers put it, in welcoming the stranger we may be "entertaining angels unawares." This point is dramatized in our first reading when Abraham sees three strangers in front of his tent and provides them with food, drink and conversation. Later they tell him that his long-awaited son will soon be born. He realizes after that these strangers had in fact been messengers of God. The point being made is that here the roles are reversed--Abraham who appears to be giving or extending hospitality is in fact receiving, and the ones who appear to be receiving, the three strangers, are actually giving. The host becomes a guest, and the guests the host. In being open to the presence of a stranger, Abraham received from them what he never expected--the assurance he would soon be a father. The same theme is developed in the New Testament, when Jesus is invited into someone's home to be their guest for dinner. He appears to be the recipient of someone's hospitality, but actually it is He who is the giver, offering the "good news" of salvation.

These words can be applicable to us today. So often, we are inclined to write people off, to exclude them from our time, our attention, our lives, because we imagine they do not have anything to offer us. They may be too young, too old, too rich, too poor, too sophisticated, too uneducated, too stylish, too whatever, you name it. We exclude them from our lives, when we are indeed in a position to offer some assistance, because we think there is nothing in it for ourselves. If we can believe the paradox of the Scriptures---that it is by being open and inviting and helpful precisely to

the one who appears strange or different, and not being in a position to provide us with anything in return—it is precisely here that we are open to a world larger than our own petty concerns.

Today's Scriptural theme of hospitality, of welcome, has an even wider reference than how we treat people whom we meet face to face. It challenges us, as citizens, to reflect on how we view the crisis at our southern border. There we see men, women, children living in inhumane conditions, in conditions that would not be tolerated in our prisons for the most hardened criminals. El Chapo is being treated better than anyone in a McAllen, Texas, "facility," detention center, or concentration camp—call it what you will. In an ideal world it would be nice to welcome everyone, but we don't live in an ideal world, so there will have to be limits. One need not be for "open borders," or sanctuary cities or the abolishment of ICE to say that still we should be doing a much better job than we are doing right now. What we see at the southern border is a perfect storm of incompetence, callousness and racism. Our national ideals, our Christian faith, challenge us to do what we can to right this wrong. Write a letter, call the White House, contribute to Catholic Charities of one of the border dioceses assisting those being detained.

Remember the words inscribed underneath the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores." How many here had their ancestors pass through Ellis Island or Castle Clinton in Battery Park, which was the immigration entry point before Ellis Island? You may say, "Well, my ancestors came here legally." People coming here today seeking asylum from the violence in Central America are not illegal, are not criminals. The right to seek asylum is enshrined in American and international law. The problem is the process for obtaining asylum and our whole immigration system is a mess because of the failure of politicians on both sides. Every wave of immigrants, whether German, Irish, Poles, Italians, were met with prejudice and discrimination from those who were here before them. We should remember where we came from.

This past week there was a full-page ad in the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal (I forget which) upon the death of Lee Iococca. It showed his picture and beneath something he once said, "How many jobs were saved, how many businesses were rescued, because my parents passed through Ellis Island." Lee Iococca, the son of an immigrant hot-dog vendor, made a great contribution to the welfare of our nation. Did the immigration officer at Ellis Island know that in processing Mr. and Mrs. Iococca he was "entertaining angels unawares?" No doubt there are some "angels" right now on the southern border.