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There was a fascinating piece on National Public Radio this past Tuesday on the Maasai, an ancient and continuing tribe of Kenya in the heart of Africa. The NPR reporter was traveling with a troupe of Maasai performers and encountered what she felt was a lesson to our own culture from these very unassuming, elegant and gracious people. She noted that when the Maasai greet one another, and when they greet others, they stop and make eye contact and ask....really ask....How are you? Quite unlike our hurried and perfunctory Hi, How are you. They turn to one another in, as it were, a sacred moment and make a welcoming and grace filled space and moment between friend and friend....between stranger and stranger.

The Latin root of the word conversation, *convere*, literally means to turn. Conversation then at its heart is a conscious turning to the other. The tension between the self and the other is bridged by an act of welcome, an act of hospitality. The Maasai go on to say that we humans literally feed each other, nurture our common life, in gracious conversation and hospitality. It's admittedly hard in our hyper-hurried world to take on such deliberate care of each other, but I fear in our failure to do so, we starve each other of God's very grace and love, the grace and love meant for us all since the beginning of time. In following the news story this past week on the

eleven year old boy who was lost in the Utah mountains for four days, the thing that bothered me the most was the fact that the delay in his rescue was due to his fear of speaking to strangers. The reporter put it that his family had quote.... “drilled into him that he dare not speak to strangers.” It almost cost him his life. I’d like to blame his parents, but in truth, this fear of the stranger is a cultural phenomenon. We in the modern West, unlike the ancient Maasai, are haunted by this fear...and this fear, I fear, will starve us..... Fear of the other....we must resist it.

Today’s brief but rich Gospel is touching this very mystery about who we are in our encountering each other as humankind. Jesus is giving his disciples marching orders, and in the space of seven lines of text, Jesus uses the word *welcome, or be hospitable towards*, six times, if I counted right....So let’s pay close attention to it. The root of this word in the Koine Greek, the language of the Gospels, is *xenos*. To my great surprise and wonder this root word has two meanings; The first is, when used as a verb, to be hospitable or to entertain; the second meaning when used as a noun means....are you ready for this?.....stranger....This is the word from which we get.. xenophobia...fear of the stranger.

Well, I find it fascinating that in this text Matthew uses this rich language, this rich word, to capture the tension that we all know too well, the

tension between the self and the other... the tension between welcome and fear of the other. Anthropologists say that there is an inborn fear of those outside our own ken, perhaps a vestige from our primitive evolutionary past that perpetuated our survival at one time as a species, but Matthew is saying to us, as the Maasai already know, that we no longer belong to such fear.... that to withhold welcome from the other, to withhold hospitality and succumb to fear of the stranger, brings death as our end, death of mutuality, death of community... It is only through the conscious welcome of the other that God's radical generosity is made manifest. It is in and through a mere, mundane act of hospitality that God's infinite and beautiful love is made present in a world indeed beset by fear and loneliness and isolation. The old ways of guarding against the stranger, Jesus tells us are over... as we now belong to a God who knows no stranger.

And who is the stranger? We first think of the poor, the oppressed, the diseased, people of other races and creeds, those who live a marginal existence; but perhaps, perhaps, they are outward and visible signs pointing to the fact that in truth, we are all to some degree estranged from each other. There is no way in this life that we can fully know the other, even in our most intimate relationships. So there exists this tension that dwells among us that would bid us guard ourselves, that would bid us into silence, into

loneliness...this estranging tension. It is a beguiling tension that seduces us into our own ultimate isolation, into a life of withholding from each other. It foments greed and fear, it holds generosity hostage, as it ultimately leads us to a tragic and painful spiritual death.

There is another word in this short passage that occurs three times, and that is the word righteousness, which is equally as well translated: justice. Matthew draws the intimate connection between hospitality and welcome... to God's justice.... And by God's justice I mean God's generous ordering of God's creation....distributive justice. Through simple acts of hospitality and welcome, even in as simple an act as giving a child a drink of water, God's profound love is let loose in creation, renewing, feeding and ordering a world dying for such generous and graceful justice. These are our marching orders.

Finally, at the climax of Jesus' teaching in this Gospel, in the twenty fifth chapter, just before he goes to Jerusalem, Jesus declares *himself* the stranger, charging us to come to him in selfless hospitality: feed me, clothe me, visit me, heal me....love me, in short. Hospitality in its myriad forms is the bridge over the abyss between self and other, the bridge over the estrangement embedded in our world, the bridge between the mother who doesn't understand her daughter, the bridge between father and his son he

thought he knew. It is the bridge between the community of faith and our neighbors who lie in wait at the foot of the bridge upon which God's immeasurable generosity will cross from heaven to earth. This sacred welcome opens the very gates of heaven.

Strange but true, this kingdom living. Strange but true, that we should greet the stranger in love. Strange but true that unbridled welcome is forever the way we live, the way we feed each other and all who are given to us. Do we dare.....really? Do we dare cross the bridge from self to strange. It means we will be uncomfortable...it means that we must risk...It might not appear seemly to some....but how dare we not....because welcome and impassioned hospitality are the keys to God's bringing God's generous life to bear in earth. This doing the faith, this sacred welcome is the very means of love itself, the means of grace, the means of a just creation, a means whose ends are joy and freedom from fear and all that might bind us.

Dear brothers and sisters of this Way, let us become those bridges of welcome. Let us stand in the breach between self and other, as strange as things may seem. Let us bear in our body and souls the mysterious and awesome weight of God's goodness to the world. We are nurtured at God's holy table with sacred food and drink for just this work. Let us become nurture for the world in our hospitable living. Let our sacred welcome

resound in earth as it surely resounds in heaven. Strange but true.... it is the only thing.