

John 2:1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. 9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." 11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Occasionally, I put in a long night here at the Meeting, and I don't leave the office until after eleven. Maybe there is a long committee meeting, and somebody lingers afterwards to talk. Or after the meeting of a small group I want to get a jump on preparing for the next one, while the issues and questions of this one are still fresh in my mind. Maybe I need to transfer my arrows about what I have agreed to do from my notes of the meeting into a to-do list on my calendar. Anyway, for whatever reason, it sometimes happens that I am leaving the office pretty late, and if it's one of the kinds of evening I've just mentioned, chances are I haven't had dinner yet, either. Or that Michel and I together haven't had dinner.

Well, after eleven, there aren't that many places you can stop to eat anymore. It's not like there are diners and truck stops scattered all through the city. It's hard to get something to eat that you don't have to eat in the car. And so, on those later nights, there is a Skyline Chili where we sometimes go to eat. It's one of the only places I know of where you can still go somewhere and sit down at that time of night. Which is why I first began to go there.

However, on our way home, we have at least three Skylines we could choose from, and probably an equal number more that are on our way but that we don't know about. But we always go to the same one, on Hunt Road, for one reason, and one reason alone: there is a waitress there, who works the late shift, who is one of the most welcoming and hospitable people I've ever met.

Most of the jobs I've ever held have involved, at least sometimes, working into the night, and so I speak with a fair depth of experience when I say that, in the working world, it's difficult or impossible to find a person who actually seems happy to see you once the clock begins to lean over towards midnight. Nobody on the sports desk is happy to see when you get back from a ball game at eleven, the cooks at Waffle House are not that thrilled when you walk in the door at one am, the cashier doesn't brim over with enthusiasm when you buy a bottle of milk and ten gallons of gas in the middle of the night. Even when you pull up to any small town motel after twelve, you ring a bell and the manager comes padding out from some room behind the desk in sock feet and a t-shirt, and he's not that happy to see you, either.

The waitress at Skyline Chili, it's not that she sits down with us and starts making pleasant small talk. After four years of occasional visits, I still have no idea what her name is. It's just that we sit down at the table, and she comes over and says hello with real and genuine friendliness. We don't inconvenience her simply by being there. She's happy to have us. We're welcome at the table. It's not an inconvenience to her to bring more coffee and refill the cup.

A welcome like that can be hard to find anywhere, at any time—but especially after eleven. And it reminds me of another time I felt similarly welcomed. That was many, many years ago, when I was in college, and every so often I had to go meet with my advisor, Professor Timothy Smith. His field was American Religious History, and at that university, he never had many students. He taught an introductory class for undergraduates, which never had more than five students enrolled, and his graduate seminars attracted perhaps five to seven graduate students. So to learn from Professor Smith at all, I took a number of independent study courses. I liked being able to draw up my own course descriptions, but it really increases the pressure when there are no other students to hide behind. Every three weeks to a month, I made an appointment with him to report on what I'd done in the time since we'd last met, and how it corresponded to the syllabus and reading list we'd drawn up.

Well, I'm a thorough but exceedingly slow reader, and I had never finished the amount of work I had hoped to complete. So after I would decide that I really had to go see him, and would make an appointment, I would approach the hour of the visit with fear and trembling. I would try to cram in more reading, but I could never have read enough. I would try to think ahead for questions I was going to have about reading I hadn't done yet. Half an hour before the appointment rolled around, I was a sorry mess, all sweaty palms and churning stomach.

So I remember pretty vividly what it was like to walk up to his office door. He was not in the upper echelon of the history department and so he didn't have a spacious outer office on the third floor, but a long narrow office on one of the inner corridors of the second floor, with a single window opening onto an air shaft. The second floor was in between the ground floor basement and the third floor main floor, and it was always dim—there were no windows, and the tungsten lights were high and didn't carry far. Nonetheless, whenever I rounded the corner and approached Professor Smith's office, the light through the glass in his door spread out into the hall and seemed to glow. No matter

how nervous I was to approach it, that door was one of the warmest, most welcoming sights I've ever seen. I would knock on the door and he'd answer, "Come in," and I'd open the door and he'd look up from his desk with a great huge smile and say "Come in, brother," and direct me to the visitor's seat in his office. Then we would talk. And the fact that I was so disappointed in myself never meant that he was disappointed in me. In the end, it turns out that what was as important as any counsel he ever gave me about history was the way he called me "brother" when I walked in the door. It indicated a relationship toward me that he really meant with every intentional part of his life: that we really were brothers, because we were created by the same God.

Those are the people I think about when I think about John's story of the wedding at Cana. I think about the waitress at Skyline Chili who's happy to see us, and I think about Professor Smith welcoming me in his office with, literally, open arms. And I think about Jesus, passing through town and invited to the big party with his small group of disciples, making sure that things turn out well for the families who are putting on the big party, making sure that the groom isn't embarrassed. A wedding back then went on for seven days, and if Jesus arrived on, say, day four, you can imagine how embarrassing the next three days might be for those families—all those guests and no wine to serve them. In a phrase I really like, one commentator has written about this passage: "[Jesus] did not hold aloof from innocent human happinesses..." Jesus did not hold aloof from innocent human happiness.

The story of the wedding at Cana occurs only in the gospel of John, but to me the welcome and hospitality it speaks of occur throughout all the gospels. I think of Jesus calling Zacchaeus down from a tree and inviting himself over for dinner. I think of a particular passage from Luke which says: Luke 15:1 ...all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

What it means to me is that those two people I think of so fondly, the waitress whose name I don't know and the professor with the small office and glowing door—those two people embody for me what it might look like to live as Jesus lived, or, to live with some part of the Christ guiding me from within.

There is a Jewish proverb from a little after the time of Jesus which says:
Three things ingratiate us to others:

an open hand,
a prepared table,
a light heart.

[Chaim Stern, *Day by Day*, p. 208]

I know we don't necessarily all have those gifts. I know for sure I don't. I don't prepare a table very well, I have no gift for arranging a space so that it's light and pleasant and people feel cheery just to be there. But I think I can work at the light heart. I think I can work at moving my focus from the fact that it's late at night, that I have work that isn't finished, that I'm hungry and tired, etc. I can work at remembering that the person I am meeting is someone in whom the light of God is also shining. Maybe a light heart isn't just one that is carefree, but one that is attentive to the Light and where it shines. I can work at that, because I know how much it means to me when someone welcomes me that way.

Maybe I just need to pay attention that every time I meet someone, I have the possibility of truly welcoming them in this world. Stranger, friend, or family—how do I welcome my sisters and brothers in the world?