

1

Imagine an invitation arrives in your mailbox today. You open the envelope and read on the outside of the card, “Welcome to Lent! Come on in and stay awhile. We’ve got six weeks together, so lets’ get ready for Easter.”

When you open the card, inside it reads, “While you’re here waiting for that special day, you might want to try some spiritual practices to help you prepare.”

Suddenly the invitation begins to speak to you: “Some people like to give up certain things during Lent, such as desserts, meats, or bad habits. Others like to add new practices, such as reading devotionals, praying for neighbors while walking through a neighborhood, sitting in silence, or taking time to use kind words when speaking with people who drive you nuts. Whatever you choose to do, you’re welcome here in this Lenten space of six weeks.”

This surprising invitation prompts you to read more about Lent, and you discovered the word comes from an Old English word *lencten*, meaning to “lengthen,” as in the days getting longer during the spring season. As we welcome more light from the sun

into our lives in the spring season, Lent invites us to welcome more spiritual practices into our lives while preparing for Easter.

One spiritual practice that Lent invites us to try is welcoming one another—including people we may not even know. This morning I share three stories of welcoming using a Hospitality Sandwich, a combination of contemporary stories as the outer sandwich bread, with the inner layer coming from the Bible.

The first outer part of the Hospitality Sandwich for comes from Disciples preacher Fred Craddock, who wrote about a time he and his wife visited another church where he was the guest preacher:

I preached four nights in a church in Atlanta, a nice, big church with a good crowd, more than I’m used to. There was a moment in the service in which the pastor said, “We’ll now have our moments of fellowship. Greet each other in Christian love,” and you never saw such hugging and kissing and carrying on in your life — people going across the room, and up and down the aisles, and grabbing and hugging. Somebody came up to me — I was down behind the pulpit — and gave me a big smack. It was just really something. Finally, he said, “All right, hold it, hold it. We have to get on with the worship.” Four nights of that.

The last night, he and his wife took me and my wife out to coffee. He said, “Did you ever see such a family church? Did you ever see such love in your life in a church?”

My wife said, “Yeah, well, yeah, I have.”

He said, “What do you mean?”

She said, “I was there for all four services, and nobody ever spoke to me.”

And do you know what [the host pastor] said? He said, “Well, that was because they didn’t know who you were.”¹

They didn’t know who you were? Is welcoming done for only those we know? What about those we don’t know? How are we to respond to them?

Our Lenten sandwich begins with a sour taste on the outer layer of bread, but inside the sandwich we find our second story, a narrative from the book of Deuteronomy telling about the time when the people entered a new land. God offered several spiritual practices in this new place, which serve as a tasty inner part of our sandwich.

First, the practice of offerings. Moses reminded the people that once they harvested from the land, they were to bring an offering to the place of worship and give thanks to God. Giving thanks is a wonderful

spiritual practice, especially for those who struggle to, “thank you.” During the next six weeks, find one thing every day for which to give thanks. You might even wish to keep a written list, saying thank you for _____, and write it on your list.

Second, the practice of remembering where you came from is another tasty part of our sandwich. Moses suggested, “You were a wandering people without a home for many years, and now that you’re settled, don’t ever forget that you suffered and were treated harshly when the Pharaoh forced you into unfair labor.” You might try and recall the struggles you have faced in life, remembering how others helped you in difficult times.

Third, practice remembering that God always senses your struggles. Moses reminded the people that God heard their cry and helped them escape the cruel tyranny of the Pharaoh. Lent could offer you a time to ask, “When did I escape a terrible situation, a time when I recognized God’s presence in my life?”

And fourth, the practice of hospitality. Moses suggested the people welcome and celebrate with newcomers who entered their land, even though they

didn't know them personally. Writer Parker Palmer suggests that "Hospitality means letting the stranger remain a stranger while offering acceptance nonetheless." How might you welcome someone who you don't know very well? How might Lent provide an opportunity to get to know someone different from yourself?

That question leads our other outer layer of bread the Hospitality Sandwich, one occurring today many miles from our homes, and yet, a story that enters our home each night on the evening news—reports from Ukraine.

It was windy and damp, with temperatures hovering around freezing. Authorities set up several white heated tents for people to warm up. Ambulances were on hand to transport anyone needing medical care to nearby clinics.

The government and volunteers also arranged free lodging, meals and other support.

At the forefront of the relief effort was Poland's large Ukrainian expatriate population...a Ukrainian volunteer in an orange vest, was handing out bags of food to newly arrived compatriots.

He directed one couple toward a Polish woman, who identified herself as Mrs. Pani and had agreed to take in a refugee family. She smiled as she embraced the mother and child who would be her houseguests...

A German volunteer said he drove from his home in Nuremberg to deliver food to the border encampment.

"It's not enough to say you support Ukrainians," he said. "You have to show action, do something."²

During Lent, you have the opportunity to respond to God's invitation to practice hospitality, to do something to help others feel welcome. Offer someone the words, "Come join me on the way to Easter; you're welcome."

¹ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 45

² Patrick J. McDonnell, "Fleeing Ukraine, women and children find refuge in Poland," 2/28/22, www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-02-28/an-exodus-of-ukrainian-women-and-children-get-a-warm-welcome-in-poland.