



WEEK 6: THE ULTIMATE ACT OF HOSPITALITY

The door of the bunker slammed shut. The ten naked, condemned men inside knew they would never emerge alive from their starvation cell. The taunt of the SS jailer rang in their ears – “You will dry up like tulips.”

Nine of the men were selected to die by the brutal camp commandant, punished for the successful escape of a fellow inmate. Nine had been selected – but one had volunteered.

His name: Maximillian Kolbe. Age: 45. Occupation: monk. Nationality: Polish.

It was a death that other Auschwitz prisoners dreaded – a lingering agony without a drop of water or a crumb of food. Maximilian Kolbe had had no need to offer himself for such a death.

But he did. Not as a way out of the horrors of the camp, not as an escape from the terror which stalked every prisoner’s life – there were simpler ways of ending it all – but to save the life of another.

It was mid-1941 and the tide of war was running the Germans’ way. In the evil web of Nazi concentration camps, the violent treatment of inmates became still more barbaric as the machinery of mass murder was refined. When a prisoner escaped, a system of collective responsibility was enforced. As punishment, men living in the same block were picked out to die in a starvation bunker.

Under the heat of a sultry day at the end of July, men from Barracks 14 – Father Kolbe’s block – stood on the camp street all day tortured by sun, hunger (their last “meal” had been the previous evening), and fear. A prisoner had escaped from a farming detail and they knew what to expect.

It was said that men condemned to the starvation bunker didn’t even look like human beings after a day or two. Their throats turned to raspy paper, their brains turned to fire and their intestines dried up and shriveled like desiccated worms.

Barracks 14 waited, waited, waited for the inevitable sentences. Finally, at about seven o’clock in the evening, they came. Deputy Camp Commandant Karl Fritsch and his assistant Gerhard Palitsch inspected the silent rows of emaciated figures and began selecting victims for the reprisal deaths.

One of the prisoners chosen shouted out in despair, “My poor wife and children!” He was Franciszek Gajowniczek, a Polish sergeant.

Suddenly a frail figure stepped out of line, took off his cap and moved with halting gait to stand at attention before the SS men. He had a flushed face, sunken eyes and cheeks and wore round glasses in wire frames.

Prisoners craned to see because although such desperate cries were not uncommon, no-one had ever dared to break rank. It was probably this that kept Kolbe from being shot where he stood: his action was incomprehensible.

Fritsch, who had never before had conversation with a prisoner, asked: “What does this Polish pig want? Who are you?”

Kolbe replied, “I am a Catholic priest. I want to die for that man; I am old, he has a wife and children.” It was a shrewd answer tailored to the Germans’ philosophy of eliminating as priority the old and the weak.

Fritsch signaled Sergeant Gajowniczek to return to his place in the line and Palitsch, without a sign of emotion, changed the prisoner numbers on his death list.

Kolbe was led away, supporting one of the other men marked to die. Later, Gajowniczek said, “I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me – a stranger. Is this some dream, or reality?”

The other prisoners thanked God it wasn’t them being led off to this drawn-out death. But after the shock of their own survival, the realization of Kolbe’s sacrifice began to sink in.

A fellow prisoner recalled: “It was on everybody’s lips, not just Poles. Czechs, Austrians, people of all nationalities – even the Germans – were dumbfounded and exclaimed, ‘This is genuine love of neighbor!’ because no-one had ever volunteered to die before.

“On the contrary, everyone held on to life to its last threads – and here Father Maximilian gave away, not a piece of his bread or even all of his soup, but his very life for another. And such a death. In starvation like that, one has to give oneself up bit by bit, web by web, knowing for sure that one is perishing ... To do it and not break down completely...”

Far from breaking down, Kolbe’s faith made the death cell a place of hope and triumph over the inhuman brutality of the prison regime.

The condemned men were on a cement-floor, in a cell completely devoid of furniture except for a bucket for relieving themselves. The foul air was horrible. They were in a frenzy, knowing they would never return to their homes and families. They were screaming in despair and cursing, until Father Kolbe pacified them. So they could join him, he prayed aloud.

His voice could be heard in nearby cells, where other victims joined in.

“From then on, every day, from the cell where these poor souls were joined by the adjoining cells, one heard the recitation of prayers, the rosary and hymns. Father Kolbe led while the others responded as a group.

“As these fervent prayers and hymns resounded in all corners of the bunker, I had the impression I was in a church ... Sometimes Father Kolbe’s group was so deeply absorbed in prayer that they didn’t notice the SS opening the door ...”

The extent of their suffering can be imagined from the fact that the urine bucket was always dry. In their horrifying, all-consuming thirst, the prisoners must have drunk its contents.

Father Kolbe never asked for anything and never complained. He looked directly and intently into the eyes of those entering the cell. The SS men couldn’t stand his glance and used to yell at him, “Shau auf die Erde, nicht auf uns!” (Look at the ground, not at us). Nevertheless, they admired his courage and behavior.

As the prisoners weakened, the prayers continued, but in whispers. Two weeks went by and only four prisoners remained alive, including Father Kolbe, who was still conscious. The SS killed them all by lethal injection. Father Kolbe, with a prayer, held out his arm to the executioner.

A fellow prisoner later commented: “No similar event ever took place at Auschwitz before or after, nor did I ever hear of anything like it in the other concentration camps ... It was an enormous shock to the whole camp.

“We became aware that someone among us in this spiritual dark night of the soul was raising the standard of love on high. A person unknown, like everyone else tortured and bereft of name and social standing, went to a horrible death for the sake of someone not even related to him ...”

“Good hosts do not recoil from human suffering, they are willing to be present and share burdens even when they cannot solve problems. They do not insist on quick evidences of success, but rather understand the small acts of grace.” Christine Pohl

- Share your reaction to this story?
- In what ways does Father Kolbe’s actions display generous hospitality?
- Share how your planning is going for your upcoming meal with a stranger/strangers, or any thoughts you’ve had about using your workplace or home more for hospitality.

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- The soldiers were very definitely agents of inhospitality. Where have you seen inhospitable behavior and attitudes within your workplace? How can this be challenged or fought against? What does the example of Father Kolbe have to teach us, in this regard?

The Last Supper

Read Luke 22:7-30 together.

Setting the scene

1. Water jars/pitchers were almost always carried by women, so a man doing so would have been easily identifiable.
2. Any homeowner who had a second story with a “large” upstairs room would have been relatively wealthy.

Discuss

- Why do you think Jesus was so eagerly looking forward to this meal? (v. 14)
- The argument among the disciples about who would be the greatest (verse 24) has a familiar ring to it. Just a few chapters before (Luke 14) Jesus had castigated some of his fellow guests at a meal, for jockeying for position (remember – this is the passage we looked at in Week 4). What do you think is the main point Jesus is making here about hospitality?
- What meal is Jesus referring to when he says in verse 30 “...*the right to eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom*”? Why do you think Jesus might have said this to the disciples?

Jesus as host *and* meal

It’s worth remembering that at the heart and center of the Christian life is a meal – the Eucharist. Of course, this “meal” which Jesus commanded his disciples to participate in as often as they meet in remembrance of him, is heavily pregnant with all kinds of meaning – and deeply transformative. And it models for us the very heart of hospitality.

It offers the sustenance we need (through partaking in the “flesh and blood” of Christ, as John puts it) in order to “do the will of the Father” – to let our daily lives be one long act of worship.

It also expresses the generous hospitality of the Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – who live in perfect community and invite us to join them in table fellowship and partnership. And it reminds us that we are to welcome others in the same way.

It acts as a kind of regular commissioning – to send us back out into the everyday world of work and home as representatives and carriers of God’s grace, love, and hospitality.

It gives us a foretaste of the Great Banquet – when we experience God’s life in full measure, when there will be no more hunger or lack – physical or otherwise. This is the long-awaited feast marking the end of this age and the full realization of God’s kingdom.

And this sacrament reminds us that while Jesus is our generous *host* (the one who welcomes us), in some mystical way he is also our very *meal* – the bread and wine we eat and drink of. Host and Meal. Both the model of hospitality and the provision of hospitality.

“People who have never experienced need or marginality, or who are uncomfortable with their own vulnerability, often find it easier to be hosts than guests. But the helper must also be able to receive, especially from those who look as if they have little to offer.”
Christine Pohl

A meal of self-giving

Read through Luke 22: 14-23 again, twice.

During the first reading, let it wash over you.

As the passage is read the second time, allow yourself to be drawn to a particular phrase or sentence.

After the second reading, spend two or three minutes in silent meditation. Let the phrase or sentence you were drawn to speak to you.

Discuss

- Share the phrase you dwelt on. If you can, explain why this captured your attention and what you think God might be saying to you through it – particularly in regard to your place of work.
- In what way do you think Jesus' impending death is the ultimate act of hospitality?
- What is your own experience of receiving Jesus' "ultimate act of hospitality"? What difference has this made for you personally? And for you in relating to others?
- Share any ways your offering of hospitality (to each other, or to the "stranger") might change as a result of these past few weeks together.

Prayer

Spend time praying for each other – particularly in regard to what has been shared in the Final Reflections.

Challenge for the week!

How's that planning for your meal going?

Remember, this is a very tangible way you can express generous hospitality to a stranger or strangers you encounter in your work.

Pray in advance, asking God to be tangibly present. Expect God to do something beautiful as you step out in faith.

Bon appetit!

FOR FURTHER READING

These last six weeks may have stirred a longing in you to explore further the life of generous hospitality God calls us to participate in. Two books that may help you are:

Making Room: recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition by Christine Pohl (Eerdmans)

Practicing the Presence of People by Mike Mason (Waterbrook)

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

Amish Grace (2010) 88 minutes

Summary: Based on the true story of the response from a Pennsylvania Amish community when five of its children are gunned down and killed in their schoolhouse in 2006. Through the eyes of a grieving mother, Ida Graber, and other devastated families, this movie explores the Amish's astonishing reaction to the horrific shootings - of forgiveness and compassion.



- What impacted you most from this story?
- What are some of the surprising ways hospitality is expressed in this story? Are there any inconsistencies – ways in which there is also inhospitality?
- In response to the leader of the Amish community saying, *“We harbor no grudge”*, the TV news reporter said, *“I don’t know what to do with this?”* Why do you think the offer of forgiveness is so counter cultural?
- Ida (Mary Beth’s mother) says to her husband, *“I will not betray my daughter by forgiving the man who killed her.”* Why do we often struggle with the tension between justice and love/forgiveness?
- Why do you think Gideon struggled so much with what to do with Ida’s anger and grief?
- The leader of the Amish community says, *“Forgiveness comes from an open heart and it comes without condition, or it does not come at all.”*

What role does forgiveness play in generous hospitality?

- What about the beliefs of the Amish community do you find challenging to your own perspective? What elements do you struggle or disagree with?

Read Luke 22:7-30 (The Last Supper)

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