

## More Than Good Manners

Anthony was fourteen years old when he became a member of our household.

A native of New York City, he had spent the first thirteen years of his life in the Bronx until an eighth grade guidance counselor suggested that he apply to become a student in the ABC (A Better Chance) Program—a national program that offers promising students from troubled or under-funded school systems an opportunity to study in a more stable and affluent setting. We had offered to become a “host family” in our community’s ABC Program, and Anthony arrived on our doorstep in September of 1996—dropped into Winchester, Massachusetts from the Bronx, randomly assigned to us (“the preacher’s family”), and all of it the luck of the draw, both for him and for us.

The adjustment into a new living situation in a new community had its inevitable challenges—culturally, racially, and socio-economically—for all of us individually and collectively. For most of the first year, Anthony was always polite, clearly observant of his surroundings, but primarily silent—a young man of few words, not one who was easily drawn out. A turning point came one afternoon toward the end of that first year when I was driving Anthony home from school. We were alone in the car, and as usual no words had been spoken. As I came to a stop at the corner of Main Street and Mystic Valley Parkway, Anthony suddenly broke the silence.

“So why are you doing this?” he asked quietly.

There was nothing challenging in his voice, only genuine curiosity, even puzzlement. It seemed to be a question that came from a place deep within, and it was obvious that he had been considering it for some time, perhaps even from the beginning of his stay with us.

“So why are you doing this?” he asked me from the passenger seat of the car. “I mean, why did you guys decide to be a host family?”

Without even thinking about it I responded, discovering, as it were, the answer to his question while I spoke.

“If you had asked me that a year ago,” I explained to Anthony, “I would have told you that we had decided to become a host family because we wanted to do something good to help someone else out. That’s what I would have said then. But now I would say that we are doing what we are doing simply because you are a gift to us.”

I was, on a certain level, surprised to hear myself say the words. I had not, frankly, given them much thought. But I knew as I said them that they were profoundly true—that Anthony was indeed a gift from God to the O’Neill family, that we were indeed being given something very precious in him. Like Anthony’s question, my response seemed to come from a place deep within. I turned the corner onto Mystic

Valley Parkway while Anthony stared out the window on the passenger side of the car and a thoughtful but heartfelt silence settled in.

Subsequent years would prove my intuition to be far more true than any of us could have imagined at the time. This young African-American man from the Bronx hanging out with us, a very white suburban family, would prove to be a remarkable gift. Once he actually started speaking, we discovered, Anthony never really stopped. The true self came out. His playfulness, good humor, and ready wit were contagious. His life experience and way of looking at things challenged us to get out of ourselves and to see the world in new ways. His teasing—in reality his absolute refusal to let us take ourselves too seriously—kept us honest and cultivated a certain humility within the family. His presence led us all over the years into a wonderful tapestry of relationships with his parents, extended family, and friends—relationships that continue to this day and which we would never have been able to enjoy otherwise.

I will never forget, of course, the Father's Day card that Anthony signed simply "The Good Son." I can still see the twinkle in his eye.

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." And it is true—hospitality gives room to the very real possibility of divine visitation in our lives. Paul, of course, includes hospitality among the list of practices that constitute a life of faith. "Do not lag in zeal," he writes to the Romans. "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; [and] extend hospitality to strangers." (Romans 12:11-13)

It is a mistake, however, to equate the biblical practice of hospitality with the informal kind of entertainment that we offer guests in our homes today. The hospitality of which Paul writes is far more than a matter of etiquette or social grace. It is more than simply good manners.

In the ancient near east, the customs of extending and receiving hospitality were a formal and carefully orchestrated dance through which a stranger became incorporated into the household. The obligation to extend hospitality—to receive a stranger as a guest—was born out of the clear and ever-present fragility of life itself and the acute awareness that no one ever knew just when or how one might be in need of the welcome and care of the other. The duty to exercise hospitality came from the recognition of our collective interdependence. It was offered, in other words, not only for what it might give to the stranger but also because one never knew just who or what the stranger might be, or what kind of gift that person might become in the near or distant future.

And so it is with us.

As we enter into the General Convention of our Church this month, aware of the kinds of differences and divides among us both nationally and internationally, we would do well I think to remember the biblical mandate of hospitality—the obligation that our

Christian faith places upon us to receive “the other” however different or strange that “other” might appear to us.

This is the gift and challenge of living in true Communion. This is the gift and challenge of walking in the way of the Cross—itsself the ultimate and divine embrace of “the other.”

Do you see?

It’s not about manners. It’s about opening the door so that Grace can walk in.