

Preparing for Joy: Some questions to consider

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We are coming out of a period when we had to reinterpret hospitality in the midst of a pandemic during which we were instructed to physically distance ourselves from others. As we slowly move back into gathering again, Advent is a good time to think about how we might provide hospitality towards those who need it, especially those who might have felt particularly isolated during the pandemic.

After being advised for so long to avoid gatherings, the prospect of offering or accepting hospitality with those we already know and love is a joyful prospect. More difficult, but perhaps bearing even more joy, however, is the possibility of offering hospitality towards those we don't know as well, but who need love and community now more than ever.

If Advent is a season for preparation for joy, this year perhaps we can think about how we can prepare ourselves and our homes/spaces for hospitality towards others who have been struggling with isolation, who have been traveling through life alone.

Preparing ourselves: What are the fears we have about inviting people we are not as familiar or comfortable with? What can we do to address those fears?

One of my fears is pandemic related – making sure inviting others in is safe for my family and me. Some ways I have addressed this during good weather is to have gatherings outdoors, on my deck. Advent and Christmas come in winter for me, so outdoor gatherings are impractical. So, I can think about how to prepare myself for gatherings when warmer weather comes. I can think about ways to reduce risk indoors, such as having shorter visits, for tea and dessert, perhaps, with smaller numbers, and wearing masks.

Preparing our homes/spaces: What space can I create for others that invites them in? What can I do, physically or emotionally, to make my space a place of welcome?

Physically, one challenge in my living room is that there is one sofa and it faces one direction. I'm considering a few comfortable folding chairs to set out across from the sofa, with small tables nearby.

Emotionally, I'm thinking about questions to ask my prospective guests to help them feel known even before they enter. Questions like what they enjoy talking about, what music they like, what movies they have seen. Recently, a friend I was going to see, knowing I was coming by plane, asked me what shampoo and conditioner I like to use! I loved this simple, thoughtful question that made me feel welcome.

Preparing for joy: How can I find the people who are “traveling alone”? How will I see Christ in the people who come to visit me? How can I also be Christ to them?

Because I am a clergy wife, I know a little bit about people in my church community who might be traveling through life alone. So, a pastor, church leader, or other community leader might be a good person to go to and ask who might be in need of some hospitality. It could be a new family in town, a new immigrant, a new student living away from home, for example.

Often when inviting others to my home, I prepare by cleaning and cooking or baking. One thing I would like to add to my preparations is a prayer for those who will come to visit me. I want to pray for them and also to pray for myself and my family to be joy for them.

The excerpt from *Putting Joy into Practice* I read in the video:

It might be said that Mary herself offered the first act of hospitality to the Lord. In the words of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, “He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt.” Her acceptance of God’s will allowed him to dwell in her, and through her enter the world and dwell in all of us. St. Athanasius, in fact, explains the Incarnation in terms of hospitality:

You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be.¹

This one act of hospitality literally saved the world. By his becoming incarnate of St. Mary, all of humankind is honored, and by his coming he abolished death, the great enemy of joy.

The Theotokos’s acceptance of the will of God at the Annunciation birthed more acts of hospitality, and with every act, joy. Upon learning of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary, pregnant herself, travels to her home to serve her. When she arrives, Elizabeth tells her, “As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44, NRSV).

Everywhere Christ is present there is joy, even when he was in the womb of his mother. And thus, in the very definition of hospitality in Christianity, opening the doors of our homes to others means opening our doors to God himself.

Putting Joy into Practice: Seven Ways to Lift Your Spirit from the Early Church by Phoebe Farag Mikhail

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¹ From *On the Incarnation* by St. Athanasius of Alexandria