

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
July 20, 2025
“Hospitality: Art, Service, Virtue”

You are all familiar with the beloved tale Winnie the Pooh. The portly bear has a lesson in hospitality for our consideration, the central idea in this weekend’s first reading and gospel reading.

Edward Bear, known to his friends as Winnie the Pooh, or Pooh for short, decided to visit his friend Rabbit. As he drew nearer to Rabbit’s home, Pooh began to hum, and say to himself, “Rabbit means company, and company means food.” When he arrived and called out, “Is anybody home?” he heard a scuffling noise, and then silence. When he called again even louder, “Is anybody home?” a voice from inside replied, “No!” And then added, “You need not shout so loud. I heard you the first time!”

There is a little Pooh and Rabbit in all of us at times. Pooh regarded hospitality as an opportunity for food, fun, and friendship. Rabbit, on the other hand, saw it as a bothersome chore he would rather forego.

In the ancient world, hospitality was an art, a service, and a virtue, and still is.

Hospitality was an **art**, an intricately choreographed dance. It was a highly structured process in which outsiders were received and transformed from strangers to guests. Given the harsh conditions of Israel at the time of Abraham and Jesus, the art of hospitality was a welcome relief to visitors.

Hospitality was also a **service**, in which guests were greeted with a kiss on the cheek, their sandals removed and their feet washed, they were offered a place to sit, and given cold water and a warm meal. Friendly conversation helped deepen the bonds between host and guest.

Finally, hospitality was and is a **virtue**, a holy habit in which love is shown to those who show up at one’s door. To welcome is to love.

Followers of Jesus are schooled in the art, service, and virtue of hospitality. With warm and caring love, Jesus welcomed and tended the needs of all, and told his disciples that those who welcome strangers welcome him.

Abraham welcomed his three visitors, Sarah prepared a delicious meal, Martha served water and food, and Mary listened at the feet of Jesus. Each provided a form of hospitality and gave us a wonderful example of love.

This week we will welcome some 30-thousand Ragbrai riders to our community. Each has a story to tell, a background to share that is unique as the bikes they will ride in. Each person has successes and setbacks to share, virtues and vices of their own, and a gift to give us, their time, their story, and their donations.

This is the perfect weekend to reflect on the art, service, and virtue of hospitality. Some may see these people as a nuisance and burden we have to put up with, and may even leave town. That's their choice.

But for those who stay, I encourage you to think and act like the host and hostesses Abraham and Sarah, Martha and Mary when you see our guests. Pray for the grace to see the Lord Jesus in them, and as importantly, help them to see the Lord Jesus in you through your warm and generous service of providing food, directions, and an open ear to hear their story. That is the greatest gift we can offer in thanksgiving for the gift our guests will bring, the gift of Jesus.

God bless you.