

What Do You Wish?

Matthew 20:21, NAB

Come On In, Lord.
Unleash Your Spirit!

The day it clicked was like a tiny mental gear I hadn't known existed sliding gently into place. Both a new Catholic and new homeschooling parent, I was still in my pajamas, eating raspberries and cheddar for breakfast while facilitating a history lesson for my third-grade son. He was working on a timeline review that included the Creation event; dinosaurs and evolution; the Sumerian civilization and its cuneiform writing; Egyptian civilization, pharaohs, and the pyramids; and Moses's Exodus.

Suddenly, seeing all of these events side by side on the same timeline made me realize that secular and biblical history are the same history, and my own human past. No

longer two separate collections of stories that happened thousands of years ago, all those Bible “stories” I had grown up with in church and the “stories” of early civilizations from public school suddenly became one history, and *real* in a way they hadn’t seemed before. The people came alive when I imagined them all living together on our common arc of time, which included me and my own family.

Even though scriptural genres can be highly literary and poetic, our sacred history is true. What if I began to read scripture with the thought that they are my people, that they are me? What if I read it remembering I will be those people for future generations, whether for good or ill?

In this chapter we consider a question Jesus asked the mother of two of his disciples: “What do you wish?” (Mt 20:21). An eyewitness account of a real person’s conversation with Jesus, here St. Matthew conveys the mother’s considerable ambition for her sons. She asked Jesus for places of power and authority in the kingdom of God for them.

If the Holy Spirit gave *you* such a wish, what would it be? Twenty pounds gone overnight? A miraculous conversion or healing of a loved one? Relief from an addiction? Greater financial security? A restored relationship?

For most of us, our wishes could probably be distilled to a single seven-letter word: freedom—freedom from sickness, death, worry. We want to be freed from the regrets, habits, and painful encounters in our lives that rob us of peace and joy. Like the mother in this gospel, isn’t my single greatest wish for myself and my children simply to be fulfilled? Don’t I also go to great lengths to make it possible for them?

In this chapter and those following, we’ll listen in on some conversations that Jesus had with real people like you and me. Among the many things Jesus did, he asked a lot of probing questions. Because the scriptures are real and true for us in our time, too, we’ll place ourselves in the narrative. As we hear him ask us those same questions, we’re going

to answer them, because a question from Jesus is always an invitation to *unleash* and to *be unleashed*.

Along the way, I hope we'll also discover the secret to true fulfillment: turning the Holy Spirit loose in our hearts and giving him permission to identify and eradicate the causes of our worry, unhappiness, discontent, and regret. It all begins with a simple act of hospitality. By answering Jesus' questions, we invite God in to throw open the doors and windows of our hearts and lives, and to unleash his Word to shine a strong, clear light that dispels the darkness.

Creating a Happy Home for God

Few things say "home" to me like the smell of early spring floating through a screen door and open windows—windows that look out over acres of clover and ambling flocks. Such a breeze makes lacey curtains blow greenness into rooms and the scent of daffodils into sheets billowing on the line—sheets that will soon cradle exhausted bodies flopping in feather beds with fluffy comforters. Can you see yourself in a home like this?

Hospitality is often understood as a way of entertaining. In fact, hospitality is a whole industry—think Martha Stewart, Ina Garten, Giada De Laurentiis, and Williams-Sonoma. Because I completely lack the hospitality gene, the exhortation, "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels" (Heb 13:2, NAB) used to fill me with trepidation. It always brought to mind welcoming that one special guest at Thanksgiving or Christmas—you know, the one you couldn't wait to bid good-bye? Don't we all have those kinds of people in our lives? Bless their hearts.

No, southern hospitality doesn't always come naturally to me. I'm a Secular Carmelite in formation; I have a hermetical streak a canyon wide. There was a time when I could

barely tolerate the thought of entertaining certain relatives, much less strangers. I adore people with gifts of hospitality for their warmth, generosity, sensitivity, and openness. But to me, hospitality was simply a lot of work tending toward a brewing conflict.

And yet, whether you have a hermetical inclination or a love for entertaining, hospitality has spiritual as well as social associations. In Jewish thought, hospitality was modeled by God, who created the cosmos and world to welcome the human race, the “other.” Think about the Holy Family, in which hospitality was a simple, constantly repeated “yes” that welcomed each “other.”

As Christians we are invited to consider hospitality as using what’s been given to welcome Christ. Through the Nativity and Holy Family we learn that hospitality means to prepare a space for Christ—in the home, sure, but primarily in the heart. We will see this repeatedly in the following chapters: Jesus is always ready to receive the other and wants to be received. He asks the question and anticipates the answer. I confess I find this understanding of hospitality much easier and far less stressful to apply.

It’s fun to have tea parties, beautiful linens, bone china, modern furniture, and a perfect home when you welcome others. But I began to find that those things sometimes became an obstacle to accepting and reaching others in need. We can’t invite so-and-so because they aren’t the right people, or we don’t have the right dishes or the perfect house, the amount of time, the personality, and so on.

The Benedictine charism is especially good at expressing the scriptural understanding of hospitality, in which all things are not mine, only on loan—even spiritual “things.” St. Benedict tells us to enjoy our things, but release and return them. We don’t possess them.

He speaks about the interior disposition of the heart. He emphasizes attitude, an attitude of detachment—or better, nonattachment. Benedict is clear that outward

hospitality and conformity don't count. There must be integrity between the exterior and the interior—and this unity is primary. I have to let my things go free. They don't own me; I am not in bondage to them. And I do not own them. I handle them with care, respect, and with all courtesy of love and offer them back to Christ from whom I first received them.

Biblical hospitality is simply sharing all that has been given to me with those I have been given. As I do so, I welcome Christ and unleash his spirit: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). For the Holy Family, this primarily meant the domestic church, their home. For us, throughout our time together, I'd like you to think of your heart and life as the primary places to share what you have, no matter the condition, with Jesus. Such simplicity of heart is an invitation and incubator for Christ to grow in "wisdom and stature" in the little Nazareth home of the spirit (Lk 2:52).

As I began to learn the meaning of hospitality through the simplicity of the Holy Family, a particular man came clearly and repeatedly to mind. An older solitary man, he always sat in the pew with us at Mass, and he worked at our supermarket as a courtesy clerk. I saw him every Friday at the grocery store and beside me every Sunday in the church pew, but I had never really talked to him. I felt called to invite him to Sunday dinner. We learned he does not drive and walks to Mass each week, so we took him home with us, twenty-five miles out of town, for our Sunday-dinner-and-afternoon-porch routine. We discovered Lex lives with and cares for his mother, is a war veteran, had a passionate love relationship that never worked out and left him unmarried, takes a taxi to work every day, and is a wealth of genealogical information on our county and region. He is a fascinating man who was visibly delighted by being with our family, but I would never have known the surprise and pleasure of him as a person if I had not attempted to apply the hospitality lesson.

I give what I have and find myself enriched and even surprised. For me, that is a refreshing understanding of hospitality because it cares nothing for what the condition of the house, dishes, linens, or children are like at all. While Christ doesn't need our hospitality, he waits to be surprised because it is a gift. I love the idea I might be able to surprise God (however loosely I have to apply the principle to his omniscience).

Godly "Remodeling"

My husband and I have been living in and remodeling a romantic old farmhouse for almost the entire twenty years of our marriage. When we first moved in, I had great expectations for how quickly and smoothly the work would go. Every room needed to be gutted and rebuilt from the foundation up. In the beginning I struggled against how long the process would remain unfinished (forever!).

Now I clearly see God has used my house to teach me important, surprising lessons on the differences between needs and wants, simplicity, patience, and the wonder of beautiful things that are imperfect but still useful and interesting. I purposely kept a couple of our ancient interior walls with their gorgeous, peeling wallpaper simply for their disheveled beauty. I regularly repurpose antiques and other items that are too damaged for their original functions in ways that are surprising and even funny: I use an old iron headboard as a garden gate, a flowerpot to corral kitchen utensils, and a marble bust as a handy perch for hats and caps.

Once I began to see our house as a metaphor for my life with God, living and resting in his provision, then offering others hospitality in an unfinished house became much easier and more enjoyable. My heart was unleashed unto true hospitality.

When I apply scriptural hospitality, I discover that I must simply give God all I have—in heart, home, habits, relationships, circumstances, desires, and prayer—and open wide myself to the surprise and freedom that happens when the Holy Spirit is unleashed through it all.

At first, my own destructive patterns prevented a total welcoming and full-hearted yes to the Lord in a lot of areas. Because it all desperately lacked spiritual propriety, I was unable, unwilling, and afraid to give what I had to the Holy Spirit. I didn't know, then, that opening my spiritual home and all its unkempt, disheveled rooms to him is the only way they can be freshened and freed. Since then, giving whatever I have and unleashing him—that exquisite, terrifying Divine—to move and work in my life has been a constant surprise and thrill.

It's a lot like fishing, isn't it? Or really, more like being caught? That seizing moment, the sudden sense of "startlement," and then the fierce awareness as the mental line springs taut, and the heart and mind are caught in fascination by some new consideration. For me it began with a tender conversation with my aunt about her relationship with God. I distinctly remember my near revulsion when she said she always imagined crawling up into the Father's lap when she prayed.

Not that I didn't long to be in my own father's lap, but my relationship with him involved a terrified respect, assurance of punishment, and extreme wariness confused up in the longing. I was unable to grasp wallowing happily around in Almighty God's lap or being there at all unless he was compelling me to. I was fascinated, but suspicious, in bondage to my beliefs about what God was like. Would I smell his heavenly Chaps cologne? Would he tickle me till it hurt? Would I then cry and wish I hadn't risked it? Would I say something that angered him and made him push me out?

Talking to my aunt, I remembered the curious story of David, shepherd boy and second king of Israel, said to be a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:21–22). Something about that possibility also intrigued me since I was always attempting to please my own father. Could the Almighty Father be pleased to such a degree? What would it take?

King David mounted a campaign to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. At that point in my life, the two most important matters in my consideration of the episode were that the Ark was where the presence of God rested—it was his throne—and that David stripped down to a linen garment and publicly leaped and danced before the Lord (2 Sm 6:14–16). I could not imagine what in the world could make David so happy about the Holy Spirit resting on that Ark that he felt unleashed enough to whirl and spin joyfully before the Lord, or how that made him a man after God's own heart, but I wanted to know. If it was possible to be so comfortable with him that I could climb in his lap and be carried in his bosom, I wanted it. I was hooked by the possibilities. In the simplest act of hospitality, I told him I wished to be released from all my doubt and fear and anger, and I opened my pitiful heart to him.

Over time, I came to understand that God longs to unleash me from all that hinders him from bounding to me with fulfillment; he waits patiently for the invitation to unleash his Spirit into my life. He is always speaking and working, asking me, "What do you wish?"; I just don't always see or hear or trust him. Maybe I worry he will churn through my life like a tornado, or shake the foundations of my life like an earthquake. Ah, but there is power in hearing him, no matter how he speaks.

For Those with Ears to Hear

And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord

passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs 19:11–13)

What are *you* doing here, Dear One? "What do you wish?" Whatever has drawn you to this moment, it is ultimately God's "still small voice" beckoning you, just as he spoke to Elijah in the cave on the mountain before sending him to continue his prophetic work.

When we don't hear God, could it be because we are looking for whirlwinds and earthquakes and burning bushes, when usually he is continually speaking through a still small voice that we are drowning out with regular noise, anxieties, busyness, disillusion, and preconceptions? What if part of the still small voice whispers in our patterns: patterns of behavior, relationship, circumstance, and desire? What if he is speaking to us, daily, through the scriptures too?

Our God is a God of order, reason, and organization. Just look closely at the diversity, great logic, and order of creation, for instance. One of my favorite examples is fractals. Fractals are mathematical sets that self-repeat. Notice in a Koch snowflake how the simple triangle shape is continually repeated to make more and more complicated patterns. Yet each large pattern can ultimately be reduced to a basic triangle.

The simple pattern is multiplied to become more complicated, and the complicated pattern is simplified, macro

and micro. Tree branches repeat in patterns. Flower petals repeat in patterns. DNA repeats in patterns. Your life and behavior repeats in patterns. Behavior patterns can get bigger and more complicated (and usually more painful) or be reduced to their simplest, clearest terms.

God is not the author of confusion but of order (1 Cor 14:33). What if today, even now, God is speaking and working in your life through the order of your patterns? What if recognizing those patterns is an invitation to work with God there? This was Jesus' own habit—discerning where God was working and joining him there. “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing” (Jn 5:19–20).

Because I didn't yet know him and his ways, I felt God purposely hid understanding from me, and still there may be times when he does and must. But Jesus seemed to think God wants to let us know what he is up to in our lives so we can cooperate with him. Take a look at Genesis 18:17–19:

The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

This passage suggests the Holy Spirit wants you to know what he is doing in your heart and circumstances so he can bring to you what “he has promised.” What has he promised?

Your Promised Land

Some negative patterns are obvious to us and require both our cooperation and discipline as well as God's grace to conquer. However, because the soul is an abyss of mystery, there is deeper work to be done. *Salvation* in the scriptures is synonymous with *shalom*, or peace. It's a great big, full, *unleashed* word, meaning integration, wholeness, fulfillment, and sanctification. Not merely about behavior, salvation and peace involve motivations, and often these are buried deep in denial and the subconscious.

The more strongly I followed God, the more intimate I became with him. This intimacy quickly grew uncomfortable, however, when God began to challenge my deep-seated distortions about who he is and what he is like. The ever-expanding circle of self-knowledge I began to attain in my walk with God was sometimes supremely burdensome, especially as I discerned that most of my worst behaviors and emotional binges stemmed from the same root; the depth of the root frightened me for my helplessness to reach or even detect it at all times. I worried I would never uproot it completely. I got so *sick* of going around the same mountain, time after time, and sometimes felt it would never be over. People told me that's just the way life is. We should all simply go about the business of doing our best and look forward to heaven when God will make everything okay.

However, I found the problem with that mentality is that if we do what we always did, we'll get what we always got. The Church teaches that we grow throughout our journeys in ways that merit reward, as well. While God will purify and make well in heaven what is not okay now, if we neglect progressing now while we live, our souls will remain tight and constricted, allowing only a little of God in.

Life is meant to expand us, to heal us, to widen our capacity and make us capable of accepting, receiving, holding, and communicating more of God, who is our

“exceedingly great” unleashed reward (Gn 15:1)! What a small reward we receive if we are stingy in progressing and go to heaven with a stunted, immature capacity for receiving and enjoying God.

The Church’s understanding of life’s purpose is ultimately to increase our capacity for receiving him. Pope Francis said, “God’s will is that we grow in our capacity to welcome one another, to forgive and to love, and to resemble Jesus. This is the holiness of the Church.”¹

To stop progressing is to say no to more of God. That’s not why you’re holding this book!

The letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament warns of the peril of not progressing. At first Christianity was Jewish. Jesus and the disciples were Jewish. Their meetings took place in the synagogues, and the first Church controversies involved adherence to Jewish laws. The first persecutors of the Church were those who felt Jesus and the apostles had hijacked their religion and were distorting it in blasphemous ways. Quickly, choosing to follow Christ became a life or death proposition. Christians were given over to the government to be persecuted, tortured, and martyred, and the temptation to return to the familiar safety of Judaism proved too strong for some to bear.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to those in danger of turning back. The author gives a pep talk, and one of the first scriptural examples offered as encouragement is the Israelites’ wilderness journey to the Promised Land (Heb 3).

Be Not Afraid

The original account in Numbers 13 and 14 describes how God’s people journeyed with him, following him out of the slavery of Egypt through the desert, all the way to the boundary of the Promised Land. Upon reaching the boundary, they sent in spies to determine what they could about