

I want to begin with two events from past Nagel family holidays. The first is a Thanksgiving I remember from when I was in college. We rarely had anyone beyond our own family at our Thanksgiving dinner. But that year a young man connected to my Father somehow – maybe a distant relative, or a son of a friend, I forget exactly -- had been invited by Dad. This young man was an aspiring author. He was working on his first novel. I'm not sure what he made of our family, but to me he seemed odd and pretentious. I mostly ignored him. He felt like an intruder to me. It wasn't that he exactly ruined Thanksgiving, but it felt foreign to have him there, and I wasn't welcoming.

The second holiday I want to mention was two Christmases ago. Unknown to me, my nephew Nate had invited two of his fraternity brothers to our family Christmas celebration. One was from California and couldn't get home for Christmas. The other young man was from around here but had no family to go home to. So, Nate thought they could plug into our Christmas.

It's nice to see spiritual growth in oneself, because by this time I did not see these two 18-year-olds as intruders on our family feast day. We celebrate our gift opening by gathering in the Living Room and passing out all the presents from under the tree. The kids first take turns opening their presents. After they're done, they're free to go out to the Family Room to play, watch a football game etc. Experience has shown that it's counter-productive to make them stick around while we old folks open our own boring presents.

That Christmas, after the kids (including the college guys), had opened their presents, we explained to our visitors that they should feel free to head out to the Family Room. But the two young men stayed in the Living Room. They actually wanted to watch strangers open their presents. Nate told us later that this was comforting to them to feel part of a family Christmas. I think we made them feel welcome.

“Go out . . . into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.” I mentioned these two different holidays from my past

because I hope they'll help explain why I'm inviting all of you today to become part of our new Welcoming Ministry. (You may have already experienced a taste of this when you entered the church today).

The Eucharist is the great feast that the King in the parable today is inviting us all to. But the truth is that a Catholic church can seem foreign and strange to those who aren't in the family. There is a tendency among cradle Catholics to think of the faith as a family thing. It's not meant for outsiders or visitors. Think of me and that young author at that long-ago Thanksgiving dinner. If we think of non-Catholic visitors to our church at all – we can think of them vaguely as intruders on the family feast. We can ignore them.

But the way Jesus wants us to treat all people is better imagined as that Christmas two years ago. People need a family to celebrate with. Many don't have such a community – certainly not a community of faith – just like my nephew's two young friends. They are hungry for a place at the feast, to experience God's love. Will we welcome them?

That is what our new Welcoming Ministry is all about, making sure that everyone who comes to Holy Family feels welcome in this church -- God's house and our home. In our Holy Family Prayer we ask for help "to share the joy of the Gospels with others." We have already established the Café and our introductions before mass for this purpose. But we can do more, hence our welcoming ministry.

What will a Welcoming Volunteer do? Once a month you will be on for coming to mass 20 minutes before it starts. You will be given a name tag, and assigned to a door of the church. You go there and greet everyone coming through that door, looking them in eye with a smile, and a brief word – "Welcome to Holy Family," "Good Morning!" You will also be trained to direct them to the restrooms, a welcome table if they have any questions, etc. A few moments after mass begins, you would return to your pew for the mass. It's assumed that you would volunteer for the mass you usually attend. The Welcoming Ministry, therefore, wouldn't be a heavy time burden.

There are sing-up cards in the pews. If you can help welcome people to our home, just fill out the card and put it in the collection basket as it goes by. After mass the Welcome Ministry Team will be in the narthex and Café to answer your questions. We need about 125 people to get this things off the ground, so we need the help of most of you. If you have doubts, just give it a try for a couple of weeks and see.

But please think of those who walk through our doors every week – someone coming back to the Church after a time away, or a family new to the area, or someone who has never been to a Catholic mass before -- wondering if this could be home. Such people show up every week – we just don't notice or pay any attention to them – as I didn't to my own Father's guest on that Thanksgiving so long ago. Do we think of this church as a closed-in family – only for those already part of the group? Or is Jesus' Church a place where those who are lost or alone can find a refuge, as those other two young men found their own Christmas in my family's house? Are we welcoming to potential new

followers of Christ? This new ministry is one important way to answer that question here at Holy Family. Please help us to answer “Yes.”