

On failing to receive hospitality

## **On the way to the soup kitchen, I met a man with a loaf of bread.**

by [Christian Coon](#)

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I was on the train early one Saturday morning, making my way to volunteer at a soup kitchen. About one or two stops into the trip, I noticed a man and a woman, each dressed in rumpled clothing, sitting next to me with two big grocery bags. I hadn't paid close attention to them at first, but the noise they were making when rustling through the bags made them hard to ignore.

The man pulled out a loaf of Wonder Bread and set it on his lap. The woman pulled out a package of bologna and little packets of mayonnaise and mustard, and they proceeded to use their laps as a table on which to prepare this meal. At first, I was a little incredulous. They're making sandwiches on the train? Can they do that? But I quickly stopped worrying if any regulations were being broken because I assumed

they were homeless and simply making a meal, so who was I to stop them? I closed my eyes to see if I could sleep a bit more before coming to my stop, where I would make my way to volunteer and do a Good Christian Deed.

A couple of stops later, however, the man with the bread nudged me. I opened my eyes and saw that he was holding out a bologna sandwich for me.

“Would you like one?” he asked.

I didn’t know quite how to answer. I was a little flummoxed, and my knee-jerk reaction was that (a) it was 6:30 in the morning, and a bologna sandwich didn’t seem to appetizing at that moment, and (b) I didn’t want to take any food from them because I assumed they needed it more than I did.

So I gave them a smile and said, “No, thanks.”

The man shrugged his shoulders, and he and the woman went back to their meal.

A few stops later, I got off the train and went to volunteer. It was a good experience. We helped make breakfast, served and chatted with those guests who came to eat what we produced, and then stayed after to clean up.

That night, though, when I went through my version of the Ignatian *examen* prayer and reflected on the day and where I had seen Christ, my mind didn't go to the volunteer experience. It went to the train and the couple who had offered me a sandwich. I sensed the Spirit putting everything into focus, and I heard a variation of Matthew 25:42. Instead of “I was hungry and you gave me no food,” I heard, “I offered you food and you ignored your hunger.” No, I wasn’t physically hungry, but I’m always desirous to know and experience Christ’s presence, and I had missed it. I was ready to make space for Jesus in a particular place at a particular time (the volunteer opportunity), and indeed, he was there. I failed to truly make space for Jesus on the train, however.

In the last chapter of [my book](#), I focus on Romans 12 and Paul’s marks of the true Christian—and how these are also gifts we can receive when we fail. The couple lived out one of those marks that morning: “Extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom 12:13). Though I had failed to receive it in the moment, the memory of that failure to accept the bounty of the Wonder Bread has never left me. It reminds me of the necessity of hospitality, both to offer and to receive it.

It's tempting for Christians to always feel compelled to give, serve, sacrifice. The experience has opened my eyes to the many ways Christ asks us to receive, and it has brought new insights into Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. John 20 highlights numerous invitations Jesus makes. The disciples are asked to receive peace and the Holy Spirit. Thomas is invited to touch and look. Peter and the disciples are asked to sit down and have breakfast. I'm not perfect at receiving, but now when someone sends me an affirming email or a stranger gives me a smile on the street or a parishioner offers to buy me a coffee, I say yes. And I have failure to thank for that.

*This post is adapted in part from Failing Boldly: How Falling Down in Ministry Can Be the Start of Rising Up, Discipleship Resources, 2017. Used by permission.*