

Recently a priest who used the guest room of the rectory told me he enjoyed his stay, but he sure hoped we'd get a new mattress before he visited the next time. Well, a couple other guests had used that room, so I contacted another priest who had visited, and he agreed. He didn't want to appear ungrateful, but the bed was not comfortable. So I went down to the furniture store in Cameron to shop for a new mattress. Testing beds is a great way to spend the afternoon. The lady there asked, "What kind of mattress do you want?" I said, "It's for a guest room. So I want one comfortable enough for a guest to have a good night's rest, but not so comfortable that they want to stay a long time."

There's a much better example of hospitality in today's first reading. Elisha the prophet meets an influential woman, and she invites him to dinner. She and her husband continue to feed him whenever he passes through town. She suggests to her husband that they fix a room for Elisha on the roof, so that he can spend the night after he eats. Her husband never says anything in this story. It seems to be one of those marriages, you know? He doesn't say good idea – bad idea. She just goes ahead with the new room, probably happy to have someone else there she can talk to. Elisha wants to repay this hospitality, so he asks his servant for an idea. The servant says this lady needs a son before her husband gets too old. So Elisha promises her she'll have a newborn son within a year.

That's where today's story ends. We never even hear if the woman was happy about this. Sometimes people give you a gift you don't really want, and if it's a son – well, you'd better want one. Even though our reading ends at this point today, the story in the bible continues. The boy is born. He grows up. He's out in the field one day working with his father and says, "My head hurts." The father sends him home to his mother. The kid places his head in his mother's lap – and dies. The mother finds Elisha and tells him to bring her son back to life. It's like someone gave her a lawnmower that quit working. "You gave this to me. Now get back over here and fix it." Elisha finally agrees, goes back to her house, and through the power of God raises the dead boy to life. All this happened because one day she thought it was a good idea to invite someone over for dinner.

You never know where hospitality will lead you, whether you give it or receive it. We go into it expecting the pleasures of friendship and leisure. But we often come away from hospitality with a renewed sense of who we are, how we differ from others, and what might need to change.

Today's reading teaches a very human lesson, not even a specifically Christian one: Hospitality is good. But it also reminds us that if someone invites us over, there is more we can bring than a casserole. We can bring hope. We can bring the promise of God. Whether we are the host or the guest, the visit is never just about us. It is also about God, who has touched us in particular ways, placed special people in our lives, and who gives us this opportunity to bring the gospel to those whose lives are empty without a visit that's heaven-sent.