

Sunday, December 18, 2011: Luke 1:26-38; 46b-55

by [Henry J. Langknecht](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue

This month millions of families around the world will gather dutifully and joyfully for a traditional ritual meal. Around the edges of some of the more traditional gatherings—the ones where the chief chefs and hosts are grandparents or the age of grandparents—the siblings and cousins of the next-oldest generation will begin to talk together. A whispered conspiracy may take shape with these words, "One of us has to host the family next year; we can't ask Mom and Dad to do it again. It's getting to be too much for them."

"And besides, they don't seem to really enjoy it."

"I know. They work so hard to make everything happen. They never sit and relax."

"Not only that, while we're eating they start washing dishes, preparing the turkey carcass for soup and making up take-home plates for everyone. We never actually get to see or talk to them."

"Even when we're just sitting around talking, one of them is puttering around, picking up or making beds. It's too much."

Perhaps the members of the younger generation are rightly identifying an issue. But we can imagine that if they saw the grandparents in a moment not protected by a patina of latent humble martyrdom or tendencies toward edgy control, they might see a smile on a grandparent's face or a shared look between the couple that signaled contentment with their work.

Such grandparents are rich with a secret joy rooted in a deep spiritual truth. They know that the Christian quest for contentment is not achieved by *being* at home or at rest—not even when we're with our families. We are strangers and pilgrims on earth. Our place is no place; our place is every place; our rest is no rest. Our richest contentment and joy as Christians is realized when we *make* a place, a home, a rest for others.

In the latest Lutheran liturgical calendar, December 20 is set aside for the remembrance of Katharina von Bora, Martin Luther's wife. The condensed biography is this: When Katie was a nun, she was among those who were sympathetic to the calls for reforming to the Roman Catholic Church. During the protests, she and several of her sister nuns fled the convent. When the dust settled, Katie was without a home. All the other nuns who deserted the convent found husbands fairly quickly, but not Katie. Finally Martin Luther proposed to her and offered her a home.

Luther called her "the morning star of Wittenberg" because she rose at 4 a.m. every day. She cooked and fed the household, bred cattle, brewed beer and ministered to the sick. She provided a home for six children of her own, four orphans (including her own nephew) and a constant stream of Luther's students from the university. Surely she was sometimes resentful, irritable and exhausted.

Yet I suspect that if you caught Katie Luther in an unguarded moment you would sometimes see a gleam in her eye or a moment of contentment: she had discovered that in providing a home for others, she herself had become magnificently rich.

Which brings us to the archetype of hospitality: Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary was visited by Gabriel and called by God to find a place, to make a home for Jesus. Her body was to be that place. Her womb was to be the home of God. Part of the mystery of the incarnation is that somehow the creator of every place and every home in the universe asked for and was granted a particular home in the womb of Mary of Nazareth.

Mary sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord!" And it does. But God is magnified by more than just her soul. Her life magnifies the Lord through its witness. For as she opens her body in order to provide a home for Emmanuel, she magnifies and multiplies the work of the God whose mission is to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things, to make a home for the homeless.

Our richest contentment as pilgrim people is not achieved by going home again and finding rest among our families. The smile you see on a grandfather's face as he scrubs out the roaster is like the smile you'd see on the face of Katie Luther as she bottles up another batch of Wittenberg ale, and like the contented-scared smile that Mary displays in many paintings. All testify to the fact that the magnificent richness of life in Christ will always be found when we magnify and multiply the life and mission of God by providing place, home and rest for others.

Every day Christians are invited to live into Mary's paradox of being the small place where the maker of all places can dwell. As members of the church of Jesus Christ, we have opened our lives up so that we can be the dwelling place for Jesus.

Jesus lives in us as surely as we live in him. Mary's "let it be unto me" is our invitation to magnify the Lord by participating in God's mission. Every time we provide a place, pour a drink, open a door, extend an invitation, ask someone to tell his or her story, make room or provide a home, Mary's song becomes our song.