



At the TABLE with Keith Anderson

The Sacrament of Welcome: Holy Hospitality

Some of the people I know and love are alcoholics. They struggle, yes—but they also know a truth that many of us forget: we cannot make it ahead on our own. Alcoholics Anonymous becomes for them more than a time or place; it is a circle of honesty, accountability, and grace.

You know the rhythm: a dimly lit room, coffee in a styrofoam cup, someone begins, “Hi, my name is Keith, I’m an alcoholic.” And the room responds, “Hi, Keith.”

Then comes the story—the ache and the hope, spoken aloud and received by others who carry their own wounds.

One recovering addict once said, *“The hardest part is coming back the second time.”*

I’ve pondered that. The first meeting requires courage—to name your truth, to enter the circle, to speak your story aloud. But perhaps the second visit asks for something even deeper: to trust that the grace you glimpsed once might still be waiting for you.

Parallels in Mentoring

I am not an alcoholic, but I have known this same terrain in mentoring. There may not be official stages, yet there are familiar contours in the journey.

A mentee begins with longing—a holy restlessness. What they know of God whispers that there is more. They reach a point where self-sufficiency cracks. As Frederick Buechner wrote,

“You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own.”

They begin to seek the company of others who know the travail of transformation. And with trembling courage, they come—perhaps to a first conversation, a circle, a mentoring session. They speak their truth. They test the waters of trust.

After the First Meeting

Then comes the silence afterward. Alone again, they wonder why they risked such honesty. Why speak so openly to strangers? Why expose their hidden fears? Did they feel seen—or silently measured? Did they sense grace—or a subtle judgment behind polite smiles? The inner critic may rise, harsh and familiar: *“Why did you say so much? What were you thinking?”*

Anne Lamott once compared such vulnerability to “seventh-grade P.E., where all my shameful parts were showing.”

And yet, for others, that first meeting brought a breath of peace. They return the next time with anticipation, remembering a voice that sounded like acceptance, a silence that felt like safety, or the deep sigh that came when Jesus whispered, *“My burden is light.”*

Mentors need to understand this wide emotional spectrum. One mentee may return fearful of rejection; another, eager for the next step. Both stand on holy ground.

The Ministry of Welcome

Some call this sacred hospitality “the sacrament of welcome.” It belongs at every threshold—the first inquiry, the first meeting, and especially the second. Spiritual director Margaret Guenther wrote of it with tender precision:

“I am about to show hospitality to a stranger... My guest has paused on a journey from some place on their way to some place. It is their journey, not mine.”

We are, she reminds us, *in via*—on the way—while longing to be *in patria*, at home.

Our task is *Gastfreundschaft*—guest-friendship. We become hosts who mirror the generosity of the heavenly banquet. In this space, we remember that the true host is not us at all, but the Holy Spirit.

How We Offer This Welcome

We begin with inner preparation—a quiet housecleaning of the soul. We tend to our own inner order so that our guest may find safety. We prepare a space where shelter, story, laughter, and tears may dwell side by side in God’s presence. The 11th-century monk Aelred of Rievaulx wrote,

“Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third—Christ is in our midst.”

We are unhurried. We begin with silence if need be, for *“a good host gives the guest the sense that there is all the time in the world.”* Storytelling should never be rushed. The sacrament of welcome is, at its heart, an act of compassionate listening. We listen not to fix, but to receive. Not to judge, but to invite. Not to answer, but to say with our presence, *“You are safe here.”*

Simple, open phrases are enough:

- “Tell me more...”
- “What does that feel like for you?”
- “This can be heartbreakingly hard, can’t it?”
- “Spiritual formation can be hard work sometimes, too.”

The Sacred Trust

As Guenther reminds us,

"It doesn't matter where we begin. It is always a story of a journey—always a story about relationship with God—whether the directee is fleeing the Hound of Heaven, lost, yearning, or living among the swine and eating their husks."

To be entrusted with another's story is staggering. It can feel overwhelming to hold someone's soul in your hands, even for a moment. But remember—you are not the true host. "When all is said and done," she writes, "the Holy Spirit is the real director."

So we listen. We wait. We offer our presence.

We do not take over.

We do not measure or diagnose.

We make room for the voice of the Spirit, which always whispers welcome.

Practice:

Before your next mentoring conversation, take a moment to prepare the inner space of your heart. Release the need to fix or advise, and offer your presence as a simple act of welcome.



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He is the author of several books, including his most recent: [On Holy Ground: Your Story of Identity, Belonging and Sacred Purpose](#) (Wipf & Stock, 2024). His other works include [Reading Your Life's Story](#) (IVP, 2016), [A Spirituality of Listening](#) (IVP, 2016), and [Spiritual Mentoring](#) (IVP, 1999). In his writing, teaching, and mentoring, Keith seeks to set a table for people looking to enter the "amazing inner sanctuary of the soul" in the most ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.