

## The World I Want to Live In

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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I want to share a story with you written by poet Naomi Shihab Nye.

Naomi Shihab Nye was born on March 12, 1952, in St. Louis, Missouri, to a Palestinian father and an American mother. During her high school years, she lived in Ramallah in Palestine, the Old City in Jerusalem, and San Antonio, Texas, where she later received her BA in English and world religions from Trinity University. Nye gives voice to her experience as an Arab-American through poems about heritage and peace that overflow with a humanitarian spirit. About her work, the poet William Stafford has said:

*Her poems combine transcendent liveliness and sparkle along with warmth and human insight. She is a champion of the literature of encouragement and heart. Reading her work enhances life.*

This morning, in light of today's gospel reading and an excerpt from her poem "Kindness," I want to share with you a story that Naomi tells about her own experience of offering kindness to a stranger while waiting for a plane at the Albuquerque Airport Terminal.

As you hear this story, hold gently in your heart a person or a place needing kindness, needing an invitation to sit in a place of honor at the table of humanity. Here is her story:

After learning my flight had been delayed for four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well, one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly "Help!" "Talk to her," said the flight service person. "What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this." I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. "Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just later. Who is picking you up? Let's call him."

We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — out of her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo — we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend (by now we were holding hands) had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

... I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought *this is the world I want to live in*. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost. Kindness. Hospitality is spirituality. Spirituality is hospitality. Especially with someone not kin.

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Jesus was a table-turner. Not just the tables of the money changers in the temple or on Wall Street, but the tables that we sit at every day.

The Beloved, Jesus, The Beloved Soul of Creation, The Beloved Holy Spirit invites us to the welcome table, where our status means nothing, but our compassion and kindness mean everything.

When we lay down our lives for one another, when we offer our place to another human being as perfectly imperfect as we are, we catch a glimpse of the beloved community, and our souls are restored.

When we love in truth and action, with one another, as perfectly imperfect as we are, we catch a glimpse of the beloved community our souls are restored.

When we ask for the help that we need, when we pray even not knowing what to pray for, when we let go of our plans and expectations, and open our hearts to receive guidance from the living presence of Jesus who is still, somehow, our teacher and healer and companion, our souls are restored.

When we see a brother or sister in need, and we sit beside them, know that we hear their cry, and receive from them a sugary powdery cookie, we will dwell, for a moment, in the heart of the Beloved. Our bellies are filled and our souls are restored.

It doesn't take millions of dollars to change someone's life. All it takes is sitting with them and letting them know you hear what they are saying and offering whatever you can, and receiving the gift they have to offer to you. And it doesn't take being in an airport, or the impoverished neighborhoods of our own community. This open-hearted kindness takes place in our conversations here at CCC, when someone offers an idea that we disagree with, when someone has been told a hard truth that they have not wanted to accept, when someone you love tells you that it is time for them to move on to a new adventure, it is time to give up your seat, or take your hands off the steering wheel. It's a funny thing, but these are the moments that make us strong, when we live in a beloved community where the person next to us is ready to give us room to live in, to cry in, to grow in.

In her story from gate 4-A in the Albuquerque Airport, Naomi Shihab Nye closes with these words:

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought *this is the world I want to live in*. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. All is not lost.

What world do you want to live in ? Well then, let's live in it! It's here. Now. Always. Let's build the beloved community with one invitation to kindness at a time.

Amen.