The Oak and the Linden:

A Timeless Tale of Hospitality

(In hospitality, the chief thing is goodwill.

--Greek Proverb)

Linden and oak, bound together,
Growing as one single tree;
Discover how that came to be
In a timeless tale of hospitality.

Long ago, there was a time when gods could walk the earth. They came to earth for merriment or, perhaps, to make a little mischief. And, now and then, they came to see what humans
might be up to.

And so it was that Zeus, mightiest of the Greek gods, left his home on lofty Mount Olympus to visit the people dwelling in the land of Phrygia. Hermes, the fleet-footed messenger god, had brought to Zeus a bit of disturbing gossip. The people of Phrygia, a fruitful land of hills and valleys, no longer practiced hospitality. For the weary traveler, they had neither food nor bed. Every stranger who came to their doors for sustenance was promptly turned away!

In anger at the news, Zeus, the protector of strangers, furrowed his silvery brow. “Strangers & travelers turned away!” he bellowed in a fury that shook the walls of his palace. “Now this I must see for myself without delay!”

At once, Zeus, accompanied by Hermes, a merry companion always ready for adventure, descended from Mount Olympus. Together they quickly crossed the wide, blue Aegean Sea and came to the land where rivers flowed, trees grew tall, and valleys gave great abundance. Zeus frowned. “Can it be true this land
of great riches denies simple aid to the stranger? “

Once again, Zeus furrowed his fearsome brows in great anger. “If this be so, the people of Phrygia will know the cost of their wicked ways!”

So wondrous was the aspect of mighty Zeus, that he always took a different form whenever he came to earth. Now he needed a disguise to carry out his plan. His cunning companion quickly devised one. Each wore a long robe with a hood to shade their features. Worn and dust-streaked sandals peeked out below the hems of their robes. Dressed as travelers, they set out to find hospitality in the land of Phrygia.

Their first stop was a fine stucco house nestled in lush grove of olive trees. Fragrant grape vines hung heavy with glistening grapes. Jugs ready to be filled with wine lined the courtyard. The two Olympian gods, artfully disguised, approached the door and knocked.

Hermes called out first, “We are travelers who have come a long way from our home.”
Then Zeus, father of the gods, humbly appealed for aid. “If it please the gods,” he implored, “we ask for sustenance and a place to rest for the night.”

A servant came to the door, opened it narrowly, and replied in a fit of anger:

In my master’s house there’s only enough
And nothing at all to spare.
Ask the gods to guide your steps,
And find sustenance elsewhere!

With that, the servant slammed the door, leaving the two gods awestruck with disbelief. Hermes had all he could do to keep his father’s wrath in check. But with his charming wit and good humor, he brought Zeus back to the matter at hand. He reminded Zeus that the rudeness of one should not condemn the goodwill of many.

Zeus, with cheerful Hermes at his side, continued the search for hospitality in the land of Phrygia. At the next house, they
were greeted by a young wife wearing a fine silken gown trimmed with bands of golden ribbon. As soon as she heard the travelers’ request for aid, she frowned unpleasantly. Once again, Zeus and Hermes were turned away with disdainful words:

In this house there’s barely enough
And nothing at all to spare.
Let the gods direct your steps
And find sustenance elsewhere!

Zeus was ready to set a heavy price on the heads of the Phrygian people. In an instant, he could reclaim his heavenly power and destroy the land with a single stroke of his mighty thunderbolt. But once more Hermes soothed his father’s anger, and the two set off in search of hospitality. They asked for the simple aid—food and a bed—that any traveler may request. Again and again they were turned away. Was there no one left in Phrygia to honor the gods by welcoming the stranger?

Hermes doubted that even his charming wit, clever
wiles, and good spirit would contain the fury that Zeus might unleash on the ungrateful Phrygian people. Zeus seethed and churned with white-hot anger. Why should the Phrygians inhabit a land that gave them so many gifts? They showed only scorn and disdain for strangers—and the very gods. Now the Phrygians would know the might and force of his fury!

While Zeus indulged in his smoldering rant against the citizens of Phrygia, Hermes calmly looked out at the lush and peaceful countryside. His keen sight fastened on a tumbledown cottage nearby. A tangle of climbing vines and clusters of wildflowers gave it simple charm. At the entrance, an old woman holding a reed basket was collecting twigs and small broken branches. When she looked up, Hermes greeted her cheerfully.

"We are travelers who have come from a distant land across the sea."

The old woman looked at the two strangers, and her blue eyes sparkled with delight. "I can see that you are weary from
your travels," she said." I am Baucis and my husband Philemon is within. How pleased he will be that the gods have blessed us with guests today!"

When Zeus and Hermes entered the cottage, they were surprised to see a room that was clean and neatly-kept. Philemon bade the two travelers to take rest on a small bench that he covered with a straw-stuffed cushion. He brought in a pail filled with water and two clean towels. Then he helped his guests remove their dust-streaked sandals and bathe their tired feet.

While Philemon made the two disguised gods comfortable, Baucis set about to make a cheerful fire. With twigs from her basket, she stirred the coals and then added leaves, small broken branches, and strips of bark. When the fire blazed brightly, the old woman carefully set a copper pot filled with water on the hearth. Then, into the pot of boiling water, she dropped onions, cabbage, and a small piece of bacon. While the soup bubbled and simmered in the pot, Baucis roasted several
eggs on the hearth. But what more could she offer two strangers who had traveled for days and needed both rest and a hearty meal?

As Baucis gathered foods to create a suitable feast for their guests—radishes, olives, dried figs, apples, and nuts—she sang a cheerful song:

Let the pot on the hearth dispel every care.

No matter how little, there’s always enough.

No matter how many, there’s plenty to share.

Zeus was pleased to hear the old woman’s song. And his anger was somewhat soothed by the pleasant fire and the sight of a table laden with the best that his hosts could offer. He was in a better mood and ready to enjoy a bit of merriment. Hermes, always in high spirits, was happy to see that the old couple had calmed his father’s fury at the thankless Phrygians. And so, invited to the humble table of Baucis and Philemon, Zeus sat down next to Hermes on an old couch draped with a
clean but tattered cover.

Hermes, enjoying the role of a guest, was quick to begin the conversation. “Have you been living in this cottage long?” he asked his hostess.

“Yes, replied Baucis. “We have been here our entire lives. And, though we have but little, it is more than enough because we have the gift of happiness.”

Philemon, nodding in agreement, arose from the table. “I have forgotten that you must be thirsty,” he said. And, moving as quickly as his old legs permitted, he brought to the table a large earthen pitcher filled with wine. He poured wine into beechwood cups that were the best the couple owned. Then he urged his guests to eat and drink their fill. And this the two gods did with great merriment and enjoyment.

As the old couple attended their guests, serving more of each dish, they began noticing a very strange thing. There was never a need to refill the pitcher with wine. The pitcher seemed to stay filled all by itself. But how could this be—unless....
At the same moment, Baucis and Philemon exchanged a look of both amazement and fear. The strangers at their table could not be ordinary people. At once the old couple begged forgiveness of their guests for offering so little. They had been remiss!

Philemon said, “My lords, forgive our lack of hospitality. We have one goose, and that we must add to the scant fare we have offered you.” And with that, Baucis called for the old goose that guarded their cottage. But the goose, preferring to stay outdoors, would not come in. Then old Philemon, moving as fast as he could, ran after the stubborn goose. The goose, fearing Philemon’s intentions, ran even faster. When Baucis tried to help, the goose fluttered and squawked, dodging each attempt she made to grasp it. Once, Philemon nearly caught it as it circled the table. But the goose, in fear of its life, escaped once more and flew straight into the lap of Zeus for protection!

Hermes and Zeus could not help laughing at the strange
sight of their hosts giving chase to the frightened goose. Zeus, out of pity for the goose, said, “Let the goose return to its rightful place. We desire nothing more.” Then he revealed his true identity. “I am Zeus, the mightiest of the gods, and my young companion is fleet-footed Hermes.”

Baucis and Philemon were filled with awe. A shimmering light surrounded their guests and the room took on a warm and steady glow. Baucis and Philemon knew then it must be true. The gods—Zeus and his son—had come disguised to visit them!

Zeus said, “When I heard that the people of Phrygia no longer gave hospitality to strangers and travelers, I had to find out for myself. It is true. At house after house, we asked for sustenance. And at each stop we were denied the right of a stranger to receive food and rest. Only here, at this cottage, did we find hospitality.”

The old couple trembled to see the great fury that seized Zeus as he spoke. But Zeus told them they would be spared from the punishment that would come to the ungrateful Phrygians. He
told Hermes to lead the old couple out of their home at once. Without looking back, Baucis and Philemon followed the two gods to the top of Mount Olympus. Below, they saw the entire land of Phrygia and a tiny speck that was their home. Then they saw a brilliant flash and heard the mighty strike of Zeus’s thunderbolt!

Baucis and Philemon watched in awe as the clouds opened and unleashed a torrent of rain on the land below. Soon, the rivers overflowed their banks and a great flood swallowed the trees, hills, valleys, and every house in the land of Phrygia. The land of the ungrateful Phrygians was gone forever!

The old couple wept as they watched the destruction of everything they had ever known. They wept for the loss of their neighbors—even though many had been unkind to them. But then they spotted their own tiny cottage floating atop the flood waters. It was changing right before their eyes! The worn wooden posts became elegant marble pillars. The walls, once
covered in vines, gleamed with the beauty of the finest white marble. And gone was the roof thatched with straw and reeds. A roof of shining gold crowned the temple that Zeus had created from their humble home. This would be the new home of Baucis and Philemon!

Baucis and Philemon were pleased to become the priests of Zeus’s temple. Here they would live out the rest of their lives in peace and happiness. But they had only one favor to ask of Zeus. “Could we,” the old couple asked the mightiest of the gods, “stay together until our final day? Not once, in our entire life together, have we ever been apart. That is all we ask.”

Zeus agreed to honor their request. They would share life as priests of Zeus’s temple. And this they happily did for many years. But one day, when they were quite old, they felt some strange yet miraculous change was taking place. Each called out to the other, “Good-bye, dear one, good-bye!”

Then Philemon saw that Baucis was sprouting bright green leaves from her head. And Baucis saw that her beloved husband
was growing the limbs of a tree. Strong roots began to bind their feet together. And, a moment later, the two were bound together in a single trunk. Now Baucis became a graceful linden tree and Philemon became a sturdy oak. Zeus had kept his promise to Baucis and Philemon. Even after death, the devoted couple would remain together.

Long after the miracle of linden and oak becoming one, happy couples would visit the sacred spot. To honor the love of Baucis and Philemon they hung wreaths fashioned from flowers and vines on the wondrous tree. And in poems set to music, they told the timeless tale of hospitality:

Once the gods went door to door
In search of sustenance.
Would any offer them food and rest
And treat the stranger as a guest?
None in this land—except for two.
And these the gods have rightly blessed!