

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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“Let mutual love continue. [And] Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

These words from the Epistle to the Hebrews refer to one of the central story lines of the Hebrew Bible: the story of Abraham and Sarah. And specifically to their welcoming three strangers, feeding them, providing them with whatever they need. And these three strangers turn out to be angels—i.e., messengers sent directly by God with a quite particular purpose.

In this story, God has already promised Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in heaven, or sand on the earth. As part of fulfilling this promise, God sends Abraham and Sarah and their household and cattle away from their home, and into a strange land where they themselves are strangers. And it is here, to strangers in a strange land, that these three messengers come.

Now, Abraham and Sarah can have no idea who these strangers are. And they themselves are strangers—so they are on unfamiliar ground such that they cannot be sure they know what is going on. They are vulnerable themselves, at risk from others. And here come these three others. What do they want? What do they intend? What will they do? Abraham and Sarah don't know—they can't know. So how are they to respond? They could muster their defenses and prepare to be attacked. Or they could hide, or run away. Any of those would be understandable and even reasonable responses.

But what they do instead is welcome these strangers, make them comfortable, give them food and drink, keep them company. That is, they offer hospitality. And it

turns out that the strangers are messengers, angels, from God, who bless Abraham and Sarah and tell them how God is going to fulfill that promise of offspring without number.

It's easy to overlook how important this is, but we find that out in the next part of the story. For the strangers go to Sodom and Gomorrah, where the response is exactly the opposite: not hospitality but the active threat of violence, the desire to turn the strangers over to the mob who will do whatever they want to them—violent assault, rape, and murder most likely. And thus the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—for the great sins of brutality rather than welcome, of assuming the worst rather than venturing the best, for refusing hospitality and intending violence and destruction instead.

But Abraham and Sarah have offered hospitality. They've acted in ways that show they are not afraid of the strangers, but rather welcome them, regardless of who they are and what they might intend or do. A & S, vulnerable themselves, see the strangers as also vulnerable—and they welcome them.

Today's Gospel is also about hospitality, but from a slightly different angle. Jesus tells his hearers how they ought to approach others as if they were all either hosts or guests at a banquet. Don't take the highest seat, no matter how significant you may be in your own eyes or others'. Take the lowest. Leave the highest for the stranger, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—that is, the ones NOT throwing banquets. If you're the host, invite everybody, not just your friends, or those with influence. Go out there to the road and invite whomever you see. Don't just welcome the stranger, but actively seek them out. And offer hospitality. Because that stranger is always in some sense an angel, a messenger from God.

Even as Jesus himself is—a stranger indeed, when we look and hear openly, carefully. God among us, really, truly, and fully God. Right here, with us. But looking and living like some ordinary peasant guy. Or someone we've been around all our lives. Yet still and always both friend and stranger. But it is only as we offer hospitality, as we welcome, that we may see in the other an angel, a messenger from God, even God's own self. It is in offering hospitality that we open ourselves to seeing Jesus in the most unlikely of people, and the most unlikely of places.

Now we, I suspect, are more familiar with thinking about what it means to love our neighbors than welcoming strangers—and understandably: there's a great deal about love of neighbor in Scripture, and in our liturgy. Love of neighbor is profoundly associated with love of God—one of the two great commandments. The Epistle of James says straightforwardly that we cannot say we love God unless we love our neighbor. And we as people, as the people of God the church, always need to ponder that. Who is our neighbor? Who are those nearest to us? And what does love mean, anyway?

In our culture, very often it turns out that the most evidently nearest to us are people a lot like us. Our towns and cities and neighborhoods systemically tend in this direction. And so it's relatively easy—and often pretty accurate—to presume that we know certain things about folks by looking at them, and where they live, where they go to school, what they do. And so it's relatively easy to figure that we know a fair amount about what their concerns are, their needs and desires, their intentions, and so on. And so to respond to what we know and see.

So the notion of the stranger is an important corrective. The stranger is our neighbor, of course, but first and foremost the stranger is **Not Us**—other to us, irreducibly different, and unknowable except insofar as the stranger makes herself

known. And it is up to us to make the space where even those most familiar to us can make themselves more fully known. To make a hospitable space, an open and welcoming and safe space. To put the stranger ahead of ourselves and our own desires and needs and expectations.

After urging continuing mutual love and hospitality to strangers, the Epistle to the Hebrews goes on to say: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” That is, rather than assuming the other is like us, let’s put ourselves in their place, let’s learn from them what it is they need, what they desire, what they will find genuinely hospitable, whether or not we need or want that or ourselves, whether or not we are able—let alone willing—to understand who they are and what they want and need. And to do that, we have to set aside a good bit of what we’re familiar with.

And attending carefully to the other—listening, not assuming—makes us vulnerable too. So it’s risky. And sometimes scary. And in any event it’s always challenging to act as if we don’t know everything there is to know, or do everything that it is good to do. The outcome we long for? Entertaining angels.

But we’re not unfamiliar or unskilled in showing hospitality, love of the stranger who is the neighbor. We practice it in our daily lives in certain ways, and it’s worth identifying and reflecting on those ways, in our lives at home and in our lives at work, or otherwise in public. Because there are also plenty of ways that we aren’t hospitable, and our society is not hospitable, ways that we see those who are different in certain ways as threatening, or not worthy of our regard or care—as anything but messengers from God.

As a church, we practice hospitality to strangers not only through the various programs associated with Open Table, but also in the way we use our outdoor spaces, and in the ways that we invite and welcome others to join us. We do it in the ways we allocate our money, our time, and our other resources. In our worship we receive the hospitality of God and that strengthens us and directs us to give to others what we have received. But of course we don't offer hospitality consistently or continuously. So we also look for ways to do all this better, and we look for ways to do it more. And so we do, I believe, put ourselves in the position of entertaining angels without knowing it.

It does occur to me that, as we look at how we as church use our space, we can be open to finding more ways of hospitality, of offering and using our church grounds for greater positive engagement with our neighborhood, our city, our area, and with those whom we find strange—even the wider world. I hope we take that opportunity.

There's an old Gaelic poem that I love, which some of you may have heard as a Christmas carol. It reminds us what it may mean when, even in the simplest ways, we open ourselves to the other, the unfamiliar, the unknown:

I met a stranger yest'-er'en.
I put food in the eating place,
drink in the drinking place,
music in the listening place,
and in the name of the Triune,
He blessed myself and my house.
My cattle and my loved ones.
And the lark sang in His song:
Often, often, often goes
the Christ in the stranger's guise.¹

¹ <http://www.alfredburtcarols.com/burt/Web%20Pages/This%20Is%20Christmas/Stranger.htm>

