

Proper 16 C 2022 RCL
Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Psalm 81; Luke 14:1,7-14
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August 28, 2022
St. John's Sharon

One Christmas morning when I was younger, a stranger came to the front door of our home in downtown Erie. He offered to shovel the snow for some money that it looked like he needed. I was somewhat shocked when my dad took him up on his offer. Dad didn't hire people to shovel snow because, as he said, he had kids to do that. Then after the snow was shoveled, Dad invited the man in, fed him a significant portion of what had been prepared for our Christmas breakfast, and gave him more money than they had agreed on before he went on his way.

From Hebrews this morning: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

In many ways, this idea of hospitality is familiar to us and we have built it into the life of our congregation and in many of our personal lives. Yet we are not people that practice hospitality because it is natural or easy. We practice hospitality because we make a conscious decision to live following Jesus' instructions and have the faith to do so.

When Hebrews says that by showing hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels unawares, Scripture is making a very profound claim. Hebrews is saying that we need to see strangers as blessings from God. Angels are messengers from God, so strangers just might lead us to divine encounters. Such encounters might comfort us or challenge us or have any number of outcomes, but they are incredible blessings to us. Strangers are blessings.

Now look carefully at the root of stranger – it's "strange". People not like us. People who might seem scary. People who do things very differently or talk funny or dress in ways we might not be comfortable with. People we can't make heads or tails of. These people -- as they are and not how we want them to be -- these strangers are blessings.

Before we all nod and think, "Of course, Good Samaritan, yada, yada, yada," let's recognize how incredibly difficult and sometimes uncommon such an attitude is, even in churches.

On my sabbaticals I have visited two churches, in different areas, that I could not get into because the front doors were locked on Sunday morning. In one case, we literally walked around the building looking for an open door before someone finally found us and told us how we could get in. Given my occupation and experience, I can usually figure out how to enter a church, and if I couldn't get in, I'm sure others could not, as well. We have also had families come to St. John's from other churches where their children were made to feel unwelcome if they acted like children, or were even asked to leave for part of the service. They were grateful that here we have made an intentional decision to appreciate children for who they are, even when they act like children and not like very short adults. We have certainly been blessed with the gifts and enthusiasm of our young people, not least of which when they start dancing in the aisles during the hymns! Then last week, a woman came to the door with a developmentally disabled young

man. She said he had loved the outside of this church and wanted to see the inside. I turned on the lights and we came in here. There were many “ooh”s and “aah”s and “look at that”s. To see our sanctuary through the wonder of his eyes was amazing. I was blessed. Before they left, I asked if they had a church home, and said they would be welcome here. She said that they go to different churches based on where he wants to be, but she wanted to make sure I meant the welcome because she said they weren’t appreciated everywhere. I was heartbroken that this amazing child of God would experience such rejection, and also grateful to know that you would welcome him with joyful love and appreciation. Strangers are a blessing.

Now I’m not trying to take cheap shots at other churches. People are generally doing the best they can. And hospitality is difficult. Showing hospitality to strangers has a cost, even when angels do show up. When the angels showed up to Abraham with amazing news that he was going to have a child, he killed one of his cattle to feed them and upended all the rest of his plans for the day to take care of them. Let’s face it, strangers showing up hungry need food. Strangers showing up from somewhere else need a bed and probably a bath. Strangers moving into town probably need education for their kids and jobs and housing and all sorts of other things. Strangers that are children might need attention and energy and an increased tolerance for noise and disruption. Everything strangers need may not fall into the category of our extras. Being hospitable can be a drain on our needed time and energy. If we are actually offering hospitality, then strangers are going to be at best inconvenient and burdensome to some degree. Yet, strangers are a blessing.

This week there was an article in the New York Times about recent study regarding talking to strangers in public, like on airplanes or buses. The study found that people’s expectations were mostly that such interactions would turn out badly and that they wouldn’t be able competently to carry on a good conversation, and that people would think badly about them because of it. What the research showed was that the interactions were much more likely to be positive, and that when approached, people valued the warmth and openness offered to them. They didn’t really care if there was some brilliant conversation, and they weren’t so judgmental. The honest connection made it valuable and worthwhile, and such interactions between strangers turned out generally to be blessings for all involved.

We also know that hospitality can be a life or death matter in some circumstances. On the high seas, if there is a mayday, we respond. Anyone, including ourselves, could be in such a situation, so we take care of people, even at great inconvenience, in emergencies. Similar emphases on hospitality appear in desert cultures, where basic needs like water could be a life or death issue. Similar assistance in the face of natural disasters or other calamities can also be essential.

Of course, taking care of people like us, in situations we might be in, out of enlightened self-interest, is not exactly Christian hospitality. We are called to go further Jesus makes that point clear in our gospel today.

Jesus is at the home of a religious leader. Jesus sees behaviors and attitudes that he feels need to be corrected. What he sees might be called an exchange sense of hospitality. Here other people are not seen as blessings but as resources for advancement. We understand this attitude. We’ve changed many “personnel offices” to “human resource departments.” Using people in the right

ways can get us what we want. In the banquet Jesus is attending, people are scrambling for the right seats to use others at the dinner to advance their social status. We can also imagine them trading dinner invitations, hoping the movers and shakers are willing to come to their place so that they get the cool-kid party invites, as well.

Now there is nothing wrong with exchanging dinner invites with friends or effectively networking. Just like there is nothing wrong with taking proper security precautions in schools and churches, putting effective immigration frameworks in place, and double checking that you are related to a Nigerian prince before emailing him your bank information. Yet when forced to take such measures, we want to be sure that we see these as tragic accommodations to a broken world, while we simultaneously cultivate effective ways to offer hospitality to strangers, knowing that from a Christian perspective, strangers are blessings.

To understand why strangers are blessings in some way that doesn't turn it around to be all about us, we have to understand how the Christian economy works. As Christians, we operate out of an economy of abundance and love. The world operates under an economy of scarcity and exchange. The world says there is only so much, and I need to protect mine. If I give you something I need to get something back at least as good or better. The world is zero sum with winners and losers. But the economics of the Kingdom of God say that there is more than enough for everyone and that the more we give the more we receive. In fact, we only receive to give. Every blessing we bestow on others allows us to receive more and to give more and to be blessed by every blessing that passes through our hands along the way. Generous people know that they receive back more than they give, both in intangible ways and often by receiving more of the same resources they gave away.

Jesus is talking about this economics of abundance at the end of the gospel when he says to invite the poor and needy to your banquets because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous. When we are hospitable to the least of these, we are hospitable to Jesus, and Jesus will invite us to his feast. When we show hospitality to strangers, we show hospitality to Jesus, and such hospitality often leads to us entertaining angels. The stranger may not be an angel themselves, but there are almost certainly angels present, watching and rejoicing. We can be assured that they are noting our hospitality in the heavenly courts, and there will be blessings waiting for us there. Jesus is not restricted only to blessing us in heaven, however. As the psalm says, God feeds his people with finest wheat and satisfies them with honey from the rock. We may be the means of providing the abundance of the Kingdom to some of God's people, who were strangers to us. God may use other strangers to provide wheat and honey to bless us, as well.

So do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Strangers are blessings, and angels are often disguised as strangers or are at least hanging out with them. When we show hospitality, giving of our time or our other resources to strangers and looking for angels, we just might encounter them. If we all started looking at one another -- however strange we are, and some of us are pretty strange -- if we all started looking at one another as blessings and searching for angels, we would find ourselves living into the Kingdom of God right now.

So open your hearts, and maybe your pocketbooks to the odd people you encounter. Be grateful for the presence of those you might otherwise judge. Have breakfast with someone shoveling snow. Strangers are blessings.