



MINISTER
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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Entertaining Angels

Intro: While we do not know just who wrote the book of Hebrews, there is relative certainty that this letter was written to a community of believers in or near Rome about fifty years after the death of Jesus. The Christians in community there were getting discouraged as they waited for Jesus' expected return. The writer urges them to persevere in following Jesus' example. Let us listen for God's word to us.

Love is essential to Christian community. The writer of Hebrews is encouraging the community of faith to "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 are references to two expressions of love that every church needs to be built on. One is mutual love, the love of brothers and sisters found in fellowship. And the other is hospitality to strangers, which is rightly translated as "love of outsiders."

Hospitality is, in fact, a very important biblical theme. Faith in Jesus Christ is reflected in hospitality; the life that has been redeemed and re-formed by the love of Christ will be characterized by openness and generosity—and hospitality—this "love of strangers."

The reference—that in showing hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels without knowing it—refers to one of the oldest biblical stories, in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis. In the Genesis story, three strangers visit Abraham and Sarah, who receive them graciously, bring water to wash their feet, and extend typical Mideastern hospitality: slaughter a calf, bake cakes, bring drinks. And it turns out that the three really are on a mission from God: they are there to tell Sarah that she's going to conceive in her old age and have a child. Sarah laughs at the absurdity of their suggestion but in time she does have a son, Isaac, whose name is "Laughter." So the men were angels, messengers from God, and if Abraham and Sarah had not extended hospitality the news never would have gotten through.

It is one of many biblical incidents in which God makes an appearance in an unlikely, unexpected way and in which individuals either miss or nearly miss a revelation of God because they cannot be open to something new and strange and different.

"Let mutual love continue," the letter encourages the early church. Let love among you be genuine and powerful and real. Don't forget the stranger, don't forget to be hospitable, and the sense of it is that sometimes people in the church can enjoy loving one another so much that they become an intimate and closed company and an outsider doesn't feel welcome at all, in fact can't figure out how to break in. It's a concern in many churches. On a Sunday morning, it is so good to see one another and we can't wait to get caught up on this and that, that a stranger finds it very difficult and awkward and after standing alone, balancing a cup and saucer at coffee hour, looking at the walls and ceiling and floor, finds the exit and quietly walks out.

But hospitality is more serious than that even. In the story Luke tells about Jesus, a Pharisee has invited a group of friends to a dinner party. Jesus is there as one of the guests. Now people then, and now, are invited to dinner because the host likes them, or is interested in them, or is related to them, or wishes to establish a relationship. Dinner parties are pleasant affairs. It's nice to be invited to one. It's nice to feel wanted, and the food is usually good and the conversation interesting. But not this dinner party, the way Luke recalls it. As soon as the guests are seated, or, in

this case, reclining around the low table, Jesus criticizes the other guests for the way they had jockeyed and scrambled to get the best seats at the head of the table. "Sit at the lowest place," he says, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." That must have made everybody uncomfortable. Just imagine if I asked everyone to stand up and move to a completely different pew. I won't do that but I know preachers who would do just that to make a point about how we can favor particular seats.

But there's more in Luke's story. Jesus scolds the host, criticizing him for his choice of guests. One New Testament scholar, commenting on this passage, said, "I'm certainly glad I wasn't at that dinner party." "Don't invite these kind of people," Jesus said, referring to friends, relatives, business associates—people who will, in all probability, agree to the conventional social custom and in some way return your invitation. Instead invite poor people, crippled people, blind people: the people—and here's the point—who live on the far side of a very substantial social boundary, people excluded by you and people like you, social nobodies, religious sinners, the unclean, the ones nobody wants to spend any time with, the strangers.

Jesus proposes that his host cross a very important social, political, and religious boundary. Jesus proposes a human community based on something other than social custom, economic reciprocity, and intellectual affinity. Jesus proposes a human community based on nothing but the fact

that God is its creator and therefore each person is a precious child of God. That challenged his own people, and it continues to challenge us—as citizens, as a Christian church, and as individual Christians.

As I read that phrase from scripture I thought of Saint Benedict's retreat center that I used to work for back in Madison. St. Benedict lived in the 6th century and founded a monastic order whose monasteries and abbeys are still thriving today. Benedict in his rule says, "A monastery is never without guests" and goes on to pose this challenge: "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ." I remember being so impressed with the idea that as we worked at the center, we were to treat every person as though they were Christ. The sisters felt that if St Ben's regularly exercises enough hospitality so as to attract guests, it is a monastery. If it doesn't, it is not."

That might also be a description of a real church. "If it regularly exercises enough hospitality so as to attract guests, it is a church. If it doesn't, it isn't." How are we doing at CPC? Do we invite our friends and neighbors to join us in worship? How does a stranger become a friend here at CPC? What is the journey from first time at worship to long-time member? Every one of us had a first Sunday here at CPC, when we were strangers.

As we prepare to receive communion this morning I'd like to ask us all to remember how Luke ends his gospel. After Easter, two disciples are walking away from

Jerusalem toward Emmaus. Someone joins them on the road, and as they walk along they discuss the Scriptures and the recent events. The disciples talk about Jesus and tell the stranger that some folks even say he has risen from the dead. As evening draws near, they get to their home and invite the stranger in.

These disciples have been discussing the scripture with this man and testifying to Jesus' life for some hours. But it is only when they themselves offer hospitality – when they themselves make the invitation and share the meal – that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him".

Jesus becomes real to us only as we ourselves live into the reality of his kingdom by offering hospitality to all who present themselves – as if to Christ himself. What you and I get is right there in the promise: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." So what we get is the pleasure and blessing of God—and always the possibility that the other, the stranger, is an angel. And that, it seems to me, makes the risks involved very much worth taking.

Amen.