

ENTERTAINING ANGELS
Sermon preached by Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin
September 2, 2007
Jeremiah 2:4-13, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Our Second Lesson this morning comes from the Letter to the Hebrews. I'll be reading from chapter 13. The bulletin notes that the reading includes verses 1-8 and 15-16, but I am going to shorten the passage a bit. There are many images to explore, and I would like to concentrate the imagery to a slightly more manageable degree.

Listen now for God's Word:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as you yourselves were being tortured... for Christ has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"... Through Christ then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess God's name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

It is appropriate that we should read today this passage about hospitality as we observe the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. From the deluge of water that engulfed so many communities in Louisiana and Mississippi, to the deluge of press that came after, we are flooded with the images and stories of one of, if not THE worst natural disaster in American history. In the midst of that destruction we witnessed acts of extraordinary compassion. Strangers risking life and limb to help one another in the moment of crisis, and individuals and communities from around the country and the world stepping in to offer assistance, comfort and the basic

necessities in the days, weeks, months and now years since the hurricane struck. Many of you in this room have participated in the recovery efforts, by traveling to the region to help in the rebuilding; by advocating for increased government assistance for the victims; and through your charitable giving.

Unfortunately, we have also been flooded with the image of stories of unspeakable human violence, cruelty, apathy and abandonment. These perhaps are most indelible, as the failure to respond quickly and thoroughly will have long-lasting, irreversible consequences. Yet for all of these failures, there were so many people who did not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. And what we witnessed and participated in was a life-transforming hospitality for both the giver and the receiver.

As Christians, as faithful believers in the stories of the Old and New Testaments, we are intimately familiar with the biblical injunctions to show hospitality and with the sometimes surprising outcomes of doing so. In Genesis chapter 18, Abraham sits under the oaks of Mamre and sees three strangers approaching. He jumps up from his shady spot and rushes to the strangers, insisting that they sit down, take a load off, and have something to eat. He treats them like royalty, these dusty travelers from a far off place. And not until the feast is over, and the men are freshly showered and woken up from their naps, does Abraham realize that he has been entertaining angels, God's emissaries who have a message for him. This visit by the Divine is a boon for Abraham and Sarah, for this is the moment when God announces that they will have a child, even in their old age. But we know that Abraham could not have known the surprising and life-giving outcome of his hospitality, making the story less about outcome than about the action that precedes it, selflessly.

We know the story of the Good Samaritan, which we spent some time with earlier in the summer. Though we don't know what 'reward' the Samaritan received for helping the wounded stranger on the side of the road, or if he even received one, we know how Jesus felt about it. Jesus tells this story of hospitality to illustrate the most fundamental Christian imperative in the Gospels, "love your neighbor as yourself." If the whole of Christian life were to be summed up in one phrase, this might be the one.

Oh, and there are so many more stories of hospitality. Hospitality is the very least we must do as Christians, but it is perhaps also the very most we can do. As the very most we can do, hospitality of which we speak is not of the Good Housekeeping variety. And if we say to ourselves that we are naturally hospitable people, and that it comes easily for us, then we are not doing it right. If it were such an easy thing, we would not need to hear it enumerated over and over again in our Scriptures. If it were such an easy thing, the author of Hebrews would not mention it in the top ten list of things the congregation to whom he speaks must start or continue to do in order to regain its vitality and substance. If it were such an easy thing, Hurricane Katrina might not have left over 1,600 people dead in its wake and thousands homeless and even now hopeless.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, which is, as some of you might remember, a lengthy sermon preached to a spiritually starved congregation, begins with this final chapter with two types of love. The first verse speaks of mutual love. The phrase 'mutual love' comes from the Greek word 'philadelphia.' This is an easy one to remember. Philadelphia, our neighbor city, the City of Brotherly Love, or, in an effort to be more inclusive, Philadelphia, the City of Familial and/or Mutual Love. The second verse introduces a second type of love, translated into the English as 'hospitality.' The Greek word for hospitality is, 'philoxenia,' which translates

literally as ‘love of stranger.’ This is a bit more difficult to remember, but you can think of a word we hear more often that philoxenia- you can think of its opposite, xenophobia, “fear of strangers.” So hospitality, from the get go, is more than making dinner for a friend or letting your mother-in-law sleep on your foldout sofa. So as we continue to show mutual love for our friends, our family, our community, we must also be prepared to extend ourselves beyond what and whom we know, towards that which is entirely other and strange.

The next verse in this chapter cracks open this understanding of hospitality as love of stranger even wider. “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as you yourselves were being tortured...” The love of stranger requires, in this sense, empathy. This imperative requires more than a sympathetic ache, more than writing letters to those who are incarcerated or signing petitions to our government leaders about torture. It is even more than prayers of intercession. Empathy requires solidarity.

Professor Ann Jervis of Wycliffe College in Toronto defines empathy in the New Testament as the capacity and activity of understanding the experience of the other.¹ Capacity entails the ability to comprehend or enter into the experience of another. Activity refers to actually entering into another’s story. Christian empathy requires us to transcend ourselves into the experience of the other- even into the darkest elements of that experience- the despair, the physical and psychic pain, the humiliation, the injustice, the smell of death, the thirst and hunger and cold, the searing heat and bone hurt of torture. Christian empathy is participation in the life of another, to the point of total vulnerability and thus solidarity. It is looking into the eyes of another, a stranger, and hearing and believing their story.

The truest sense of Christian hospitality encompasses this empathy. And this will, necessarily, carry us far away from what is comfortable and expected when we extend ourselves

to another. I think that most of us, in an effort to just make it to the end of the day, place a fair distance between ourselves and those around us. Think about how absolutely alone and private you can feel on a crowded train at rush hour. The physical distance is non-existent, but the emotional distance is vast. I've been tempted, at times, to start dancing along to the music on my iPod on the Q train, just to see if anyone would look up at me and acknowledge that the distance between is a product of our own making. Probably they wouldn't. It's the game we play with small children: if I cover my eyes, you and I both disappear. It's an urban safety mechanism, and yet a concise description of how most of the world functions in relation to the stranger. We'd just rather not have to be confronted by the other's reality, for fear of what it might force us to consider.

The homeless, for instance, are perhaps both the most visible and least visible people in our city. On the one hand, they fill the trains and crowd the stairways and generally appear when we are feeling our least hospitable. Yet for all their presence, they are invisible. We don't even look them in the eyes as we shake our heads no to their request for money. It would be too intimate, require too much on our part, because to look into the eyes of another, especially one in crisis or despair, would force us to think about their predicament, and also ours, and maybe even transport us into their shoes for a split second.

To love the stranger, to truly empathize, might put us in danger, physical danger and certainly spiritual danger. How close are we willing to get to another in the quest to be truly empathetic and hospitable? When I worked street outreach in the city, my team and I drove around in a van and looked for the mentally ill homeless on the street. They tend to hide alone, away from crowds and definitely away from other homeless people. They are the most difficult to bring indoors, because many of suffered both imprisonment and torture, of a sort. There was

this one guy, Gregory. He stayed in a small courtyard between two office buildings near Penn Station. He was a large, large man with a shaved head and bulging, red eyes. He shaved his head with a dull razor, so his scalp was bald and bleeding. He paced a lot, talked a lot to himself and became very agitated whenever we tried to approach him. So we never came very close; we just let him know we there, placed a sandwich and a juice box on the ground, and continued on. We did this for four months before Gregory agreed to come with us for a shower. We gathered from his story that he had spent many years in Creedmor, an old state, mental hospital known for its appalling conditions. The paranoid schizophrenic men, like Gregory, were locked on a ward with virtually no clothes, no toilet facilities, no psychiatric services. It must have been a living hell. No wonder Gregory preferred to live outdoors, and no wonder that he refused ever to get in the van with us. The most he would do is walk with us the twenty blocks to our drop-in center. One day, we were short-staffed. Gregory and I needed to walk from the Social Security Office down to the drop-in center, about fifteen blocks. My team leader was out, and the van driver needed to stay with the van. Needless to say, I was a little terrified at the prospect of walking alone with this large, actively psychotic man. As we walked down the sidewalk, he kept jumping around me. Every time we crossed the street, he seemed to jumped to my other side. About half way to the shelter, it occurred to me what was going on. Gregory kept shifting around so that he would be on my street side, blocking me from the curb, and thus from dangerous traffic. It is a gentlemanly courtesy from a different generation, and Gregory was clearly brought up to be a gentleman.

It was an eye-opening, slap in the face, come-to-Jesus moment, for me. It was a split second of the kind of empathy about which the author of Hebrews is speaking. I can never be in Gregory's shoes; I can never have those experiences of the living hell in the way he had them,

but I stepped inside his shoes for a moment. It was not my experience of him, but his experience through me. I felt the progression of his life, from health to sickness, from beloved child, obedient son and individual to paranoid schizophrenic, object of fear and loathing, nobody. And at that moment, all that was left were the stares of passers-by, the neglect of the mental health system, and total invisibility.

That was a moment of revelation in my understanding of empathy. And in that moment, I knew that I was entertaining an angel. Gregory was an angel; he radiated the presence of God to me. It was a defining experience in my faith, and ever since I have spent my days seeking that divine presence again. It's what prompted me to become a social worker, and it's what confirmed in me my understanding of the Christian vocation. We open the possibility of entertaining angels by making ourselves vulnerable in relationship with the world. We make ourselves vulnerable to the stranger, trusting in God, but having no idea how things will end up. Will the stranger be grateful and reveal himself or herself as an angel, or will the stranger take advantage of our hospitality, put us at risk, harm us, even. We cannot know who are the angels and who are the plain, old humans, and who are the ones guided by a spirit of malevolence.

The author of Hebrews says, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers... remember those who are in prison [and] those who are being tortured... for Christ has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" Christ says this to the imprisoned and the tortured, Christ says this to us. Christ says, go ahead, show hospitality, engage in the vulnerable act of empathy- I will never leave you or forsake you. And we reply, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" The worst would be to do nothing at all- to live without the transformation that comes when we make ourselves

vulnerable and make room for God's presence. We would be like those who prefer cracked cisterns and empty reservoirs to the fountain of living water that God offers.

But remember, as you reach out to others, arms extended, on the tips of your toes, someone is also reaching out to you. We are not only the hosts and hostesses. We are not only the empathizers. We are also the strangers, also the potential angels. We carry our own experiences of imprisonment and torture; our own experiences of isolation and invisibility. God calls us to be the givers of hospitality to strangers, but also the receivers. When we forget how to give, or how to receive, we need only turn to the Gospels. For Christ is our model. Christ lived for us all, and we respond by living for each other, through the power and presence of God. God incarnate who experienced it all, the heights and the depths, for us. God who will not leave us or forsake us. Our reservoirs will be filled with the living water and our cups will overflow.

How can we not then offer continual sacrifices of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess God's name. For it is pleasing to God and it is our calling.

¹ L. Ann Jervis, *Empathy and the New Testament*. McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry, Volume 3 (2000), McMaster Divinity College, Ontario. <http://www.mcmaster.ca/mjtm/3-1b.htm>.