

THE FREEDOM TO ENTERTAIN ANGELS

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis

Sunday, September 30, 2018

Gifts of New Immigrants

Judges 6:11-24 and Matthew 10:40-42

Before I begin the sermon today, I'd like to take a moment of pastoral privilege to acknowledge what a difficult week it has been for our country, as many have watched and responded to the Kavanaugh hearings. Today, as we celebrate the gifts of new immigrants, I will not touch on issues of sexual abuse and silencing directly, but the testimonies raise a number of theological and pastoral issues that bear conversation, so please seek out each other or Bob and I if you would like to talk.

As we celebrate the gifts of new immigrants today with many of our Presbyterian brothers and sister around the country, it was Hebrews 13:2 that got stuck in my head this week: *Don't neglect to open your home to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.* At this stage in my ministry, I've come a long way in my appreciation of angels, biblically and metaphorically. I like the angel who appears at Jesus' ascension to remind the disciples not to just stare up at the heavens, I like the angel(s) that appear at the tomb to tell the disciples – including Mary and the other women – that Jesus is risen. I've come to appreciate Gabriel and the good news he has for Mary that she will become pregnant with God's son and name him Jesus. In the New Testament it seems like the angels appear with the reassurance of words, "do not be afraid." A sure sign that a little fear and trembling is merited!

In the Old Testament, however, angels are more clandestine. They often appear to be like regular folks. Like the travelers that Abraham and Sarah welcome in Genesis 18, and then come to find out those two are messengers from God sent to share the good news that Sarah will have a child in her old age. Sometimes they are very human, like the angel that wrestles with Jacob, and sometimes they stand out more and are clearly divine creatures, like the angel that blocks the way for Balaam's donkey. (I'll let you look that one up, it's quite a story!)

In the story Mark read to us from Judges 6 today, the angel is both a messenger and the presence of God. That inter-changeability elevates angel's role even more, as they often represent the presence of God when interacting with humans. In this case, it's not just angels who we entertain unawares, but also God's own self.

After worship the past three Sundays, we have heard from speakers connected to our immigration program about the angels who have helped immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers and the work that is still needed. We heard how much more difficult it is to navigate the systems for immigration these days in our country than it was even five years ago. And those weren't that great of days for immigrants either.

Front and center in the news about immigration the last few weeks has been the reduction of the number of refugees our country will allow into the United States next year. The maximum number that will be allowed into the United States has dropped from 45,000 to 30,000.ⁱ That number is ridiculously low given our assets to address the growing number of refugees around the world. The UNHCR estimates that there are 25.4 million refugees around the world, not including another 40 million internally displaced persons – that means people who are not able to be in their homes within their own country. That is over 60 million displaced persons worldwide. Syria alone is estimated to have over 6.3 million refugees. Over the last six years, the number of refugees has increased each year, and the number six years ago surpassed the numbers of refugees after World War II. Our sisters and brothers in Turkey, Pakistan and Uganda take in the highest numbers of refugees each year, with each country allowing in over a million refugees.ⁱⁱ Germany, took in 669,500 refugees last year thanks to Chancellor Merkel's "open door policy."ⁱⁱⁱ Admittedly Germany is facing a number of struggles to provide what is needed for these refugees, but given the two problems, I'd prefer the work of determining how to be more welcoming.

With all of these statistics, I've been honestly wrestling about what is meaningful to say about gifts of new immigrants today in relation to the global and individual crises these numbers represent for real people. One thing to say is that I'd love to see even more of you get involved in our programs that support and encourage immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. There are a good number of opportunities - join the public witness and immigration action group, they meet the fourth Tuesday of the month, sign up to help on the refugee team that helps welcome a refugee or refugee family as we partner with Church World Service. We've already served two years as hosts to a refugee family from Eritrea and from Afghanistan. Next week, when we collect the global peace and witness offering, you'll hear Esther Gowrie talk about our involvement with the New Sanctuary Coalition. Our portion of that offering will go to the New Sanctuary Coalition to help immigrants right here in New York City. The New Sanctuary Coalition is an interfaith network of congregations, organizations and individuals who stand publicly with families and other communities resisting deportation.

Another idea I'd like to suggest is that if you haven't yet read our summer congregational read, *Behold the Dreamers*, I would encourage you to pick it up and put it on your fall reading list. It's an amazingly nuanced story about a family from Cameroon who immigrate here to the United States. The plot shows the struggles they face around employment, financial stability, cultural differences, legal resources, education, just to name a few key themes of this book.

We had the privilege of having the author, Imbolo Mbue, here last Sunday after worship to speak about the themes of the novel. She shared her own story as an immigrant from Cameroon and how her own struggles – these challenges and joys- became ideas for the characters in this story. A few things stood out to me in the conversation. The first thing that struck me was how many of the participants who spoke started their questions and comments with the phrase, “My family immigrated here when...” It was moving realization of how the story of immigration and the story of our family trees are so intertwined. We need to draw more on those stories and talk together about how to respond and offer hospitality to those angels that we might not even recognize in our midst.

When Imbolo discussed how there had been some criticism of her depiction of the American dream in the book, I realized she was onto a key aspect of entertaining angels without knowing it. She asserted that she really feels that the core of the American dream is about freedom. What drew her to the United States and what draws others to this country is the freedom to make choices. For the characters in her book, those choices are about family, for home, for ethics, for helping or not helping one another, for learning the value and survival of their own selves.

Her characters' understanding of the American dream is not a post-Enlightenment individualistic, pull yourself up by your bootstraps vision of the American dream that puts America in the backdrop to the Marlboro Man on an interstate billboard. Her depiction is an American dream that captures freedom and choice in a very nuanced way. That nuanced understanding of the American dream is a gift that we need to hear, it has the potential to unite us and heal divisions among us. As we celebrate the gifts of new immigrants today, our work together is about determining ways that we can embody freedom in our hospitality.

Our history embraces that freedom in a variety of ways. One way manifests itself recently when we were approached by the Hungarian consulate to put a memorial to Zsuzannah Kossuth here at our church. In consultation with David Pultz, our archivist, we learned the story of Zsuzannah and her life here in NYC, arriving in the mid-1800's as refugee herself from then war-torn Hungary after being held in prison in Austria for some time. A nurse who tended soldiers on both sides of the conflict in Hungary, she found refuge here in New York City, and specifically here at First Church with the Douglas family who were members of the church at that time. Since her remains were buried here in their family vault under the north lawn, the current consulate wanted to erect a plaque, which was approved by our session on the recommendation of a special task force. A service was held in March by the consulate to dedicate the plaque, but today, we recognize that early immigrant welcome as a significant piece of our history. I

encourage you to take a look at the plaque today on your way to coffee hour. It's a wonderful reminder of the work of this church for a very long time to entertain angels unawares.

But what do freedom and hospitality have to do with one another? As I was reading and teaching about the story from Judges 6 that Mark read for us this morning, I was again struck by the ordinary aspects of entertaining angels without knowing it. Gideon really doesn't know who he is talking with, especially not at first. I imagine him having his head down tending to his work when the angel first appears. Gideon's directness, although perhaps just on the border of irreverence, is received as a positive quality for what he is being called to do. At Bible study this past week, we discussed this passage and the shifting nature of this angel that is talking to Gideon. At one point, they are described as the "angel of the Lord" and then a few short verses later, there is no mediation from an angel, but Gideon is in the direct presence of God. What I notice about Gideon though is that he offers honesty and hospitality no matter if he is interacting with the Lord or the angel of the Lord, or someone who he doesn't even realize is an angel. If he is unaware of which he is talking to at any given moment, he does not let on that he cares. He certainly entertains angels and is divinely aware of the holiness of the situation but unaware that his response should be different than if he were talking to a friend over a meal. And that's the simplicity of the freedom we have in hospitality.

This sermon doesn't boil down to some profound theological interpretation you haven't heard before. It boils down to a story you've heard over and over again; a story like Gideon's, where a person gets a chance to listen, and respond, and understand that they have a choice in how they treat people. You have a choice. We as a church have a choice. We are emboldened with freedom. Gideon going up against the Midianites was a long shot. The kind of long shot it feels like we have with immigration reform. But theological long shots are the norm of our story – in fact, we believe possibility lies right within the things that are impossible. The resurrection, the youngest getting the inheritance, the prodigal son being welcomed home, God becoming human in an infant. In our faith, we know about the impossible, and we know about what it means to entertain angels without being aware. If we listen to the stories of new immigrants, to the stories in our own families, the stories in our own history, we learn how to act out of our own freedom toward an even greater hospitality. We become even more aware of a hospitality where the presence of angels is as commonplace as the hands we hold across the table.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/us/politics/trump-refugees-historic-cuts.amp.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.vox.com/platform/amp/world/2018/6/20/17479612/world-refugee-day-immigration-venezuela>