

Beyond Welcome
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Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Today's lesson comes to us from the book of Hebrews, and as Pastor Mike said in his sermon a few weeks back, it is really more of a sermon itself than a letter. The general thrust of the sermon seems to be to try and encourage the church, probably a church in Rome, but we don't know for sure, to encourage the church to not lose heart and to maintain its principles and practices despite persecution and disappointment. Today's lesson in particular describes a list of practices for Christians to pay attention to: 1) Mutual love, 2) hospitality, 3) remembering those in prison 4) honoring marriage and so on. Any of these could make an excellent sermon topic, but this morning I want to focus in on the concept of hospitality. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Nearly every book you can find that has anything to do with church growth and vitality mentions hospitality. Most of them, however seem to focus more on it as a strategy for drawing and keeping members than as a practice of discipleship for those who seek to follow Christ. These books talk about parking and signage, warm welcome at the doors of the church and personal follow-up after folks visit. And all of these are important if a church is to grow in terms of numbers. I'm happy to say that as a congregation we are doing a pretty decent job with most of these "tricks of the trade." But the biblical concept of hospitality is a spiritual discipline, a practice that moves well beyond welcoming, to truly receiving the stranger, to creating space within our community for the needs and the gifts of those who come under our roofs and into our circles. In the Bible, we recall that angels are not our personal protectors who look out for our

well being, but instead are messengers of God, who carry with them God's sometimes quite disturbing, word. The author of Hebrews reminds the church that in showing hospitality to strangers, some have encountered God's very own messengers. Hospitality cares little for politeness and formality, and offers a warm embrace instead of an arms length handshake. Whereas welcoming offers people a seat in a nice, if not a bit stuffy living room, hospitality brings people into the kitchen where we all know the best conversations happen and where people can really be themselves. Unlike basic welcoming, there are no tricks for hospitality. It must be centered on a genuine desire to receive a stranger, to allow them to move into the community at their own pace, in their own way. A welcoming congregation asks what can we do to make you comfortable here, a hospitable congregation asks "how is the spirit moving you to ministry, and what can we do to aid you in responding to that call." It is a subtle, but important difference.

Many of you know that every summer Danielle and I travel to northern Wisconsin for a week at my family's cottage on a lake. Painted in white on the outside wall of the cottage as you approach the main door, is the following poem: "Welcome friend, be at your ease, get up when you're ready, go to bed when you please. Happy to share with you such as we've got, the leaks in the roof and the soup in the pot. You don't have to thank us, or laugh at our jokes, sit deep and come often your one of the folks."¹

What this poem lacks in sophistication, it most certainly makes up for in charm. And even more than that, it somehow speaks quite succinctly about the practice of hospitality. The "we don't have much, but what we have is yours to share" mentality goes to the very heart of hospitality, the poem welcomes the friend and even more profoundly names the friend as "one of the folks." Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, "There is no doubt . . .that the deepest

¹ "Untitled" by Thelma Evelyn Jones as found on the web at <http://www.poetry.com/poets/ThelmaJones.html>

impulse of the Bible is toward inclusion, that all of God's creatures be accorded dignity, respect, safety and a sense of belonging. [It is this] deep biblical impulse [that] gives the church its primal mandate."² As Christians then, we are called to create safe space, sanctuary, where those who wish to encounter the presence of God in our churches can find an open community ready to receive them.

And while radical hospitality sounds good, we must also remember that there are both joys and costs to discipleship. The specific practice of hospitality is no different from this more general description of our calling. What is so difficult about radical hospitality, is that we are forced to give up control, or more accurately give up our illusion of control. If we are doing our jobs well, if we are living as Christians in the world—both without shame and without judgment—we will undoubtedly find new people coming into our lives and into our churches. But these new people, led by the spirit in their own ways, will bring their own ideas, their own convictions, their own faith journeys all of which much be honored and integrated if our hospitality is to move beyond basic friendliness. Many struggling and dying churches are friendly churches that want new people, as long as they act like old timers, that want children as long as they sit quiet and don't disrupt things, that want growth as long as it doesn't mean we have to change. But hospitality is a lot more dangerous, difficult and more rewarding than simply being friendly because hospitality and inclusion means that we ourselves are willing to change and be changed by those who God has called us to receive, believing that they too are moved by the spirit, and that perhaps they are carrying with them God's still speaking word for us. Hospitality understands that strangers become guests as we recognize their holiness, as we

² Walter Brueggemann, "Message of inclusion not just 'disputed' — it's 'urgent,'" UCNews Dec 05 - Jan 06 and on the web: <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/jan06/bible.htm>

seek to discover how we are made better by the new and unique gifts brought as strangers come into our community.

I keep talking about hospitality as a spiritual discipline rather than as a personal or even communal disposition, because like all spiritual disciplines, hospitality takes practice. Thankfully, most of us are more practiced at hospitality than we might think, at least at receiving if not also giving it. Today we will gather around the communion table to share together a holy meal. It is an open table, all who wish to partake are invited--there are no requirements of faith, no criteria we must meet, no tests we must pass. As we approach the table we recall that we are not hosts at this meal, but rather we are guests, invited to join in God's glorious banquet where even a little bread and a little cup are more than enough and where all that we have is offered to Christ and Christ meets us in that moment. During communion we take in the body and blood of Christ, we commune with Christ, we take the presence of the living Christ into our bodies, and we are transformed. If we wish to engage this wondrous mystery, if we dare to receive that which we don't fully understand, we are practicing hospitality. The sacrament of communion transcends time and space, language, culture and theology. It is a gathering in of all God's children, the greatest example of extravagant hospitality. As I receive communion, I like to think about all the people with whom I share the meal. I like to ponder all the people, past and present, how different we are from one another and how we still share the same grace, the same renewal, the same hospitality. Whether we are in prison, or in a monastery, whether in Korea, or Haiti, Brazil or Brooklyn, young and old, new or familiar, Christ has thrown open the doors and called to the streets—Y'all come.

This morning let us reflect on the wideness of God's mercy and the depth of God's grace. Let us reflect on how we came to be members of the church of Jesus Christ and how we came to

be in this very congregation this day. And finally, let us reflect on how we might receive those who wander into our church and our community, how wide we might throw open the doors, and how we might receive those angels, god's messengers in our midst, with a radical hospitality and extravagant embrace akin to the way in which God has received us.