

“Entertaining Angels”
Hebrews 13: 1-3; Matthew 25:31-40
November 30, 2003 (First Sunday of Advent)
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My Grandma Dalton was an amazing woman. She lived 99 years. Most of those years she spent serving other people. She was a wife. She was the mother of five boys. She cared for aging and dying relatives over extended periods of time within her home. During my childhood I remember her cooking a huge Sunday meal for our family every Sunday and still making it to church.

On Sundays Grandma would serve up the food out of the pots and we'd help her “tote and carry” the food to the table. (This was one of the few chores she would let us help with, although I had the distinct privilege of getting to mix up the cornbread in the iron pan where cornbread was mixed and cooked almost every day.) I noticed during the toting and carrying that Grandma would leave several servings of food in each pot. I asked Grandma about this and she said that the food was for anyone who might drop in. I pictured of course her being prepared for a friend or family member who might drop by. But I learned from my father that my Grandma was always prepared for the stranger who might drop by needing food.

He recalled many times from his childhood when people literally off the street would stop at their house which was right on Route 11 in the Winchester area and my Grandma would welcome them in and feed them. Sometimes these strangers would spend the night. Sometimes they stayed even longer. Perhaps these strangers in need were drawn to Grandma's house because it was right next to our church. Maybe people

expected that the minister lived there. He didn't. All we know is that they came and Grandma took care of them—these strangers passing through town.

Generally when we think of hospitality, we think of welcoming people we know. We think of creating an environment in our homes or elsewhere that feels comfortable our friends and family. We clean house. We fix nice food. We offer drinks. We're on good behavior. We put out fresh towels and linens. We do what we can to help these people we know, these people we've invited into our space to feel at home, comfortable, maybe even pampered.

The writer of Hebrews has gone on for 12 chapters about some really deep theology. Then he gets to chapter 13 and begins to wrap things up. Tom Long in his commentary on Hebrews says: "It is somehow comforting to know that the book in the New Testament with arguably the most elaborate doctrine about Jesus Christ brings it immediately home to the dinner table. It is almost as if the Preacher had said, 'Because Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all time, the heir of all things is the great high priest who offered the perfect and lasting sacrifice and now sits in majesty at the right hand of God, therefore polish the silver and set the table for company'" (Long, Hebrews, p. 142-143.)

In some ways, though, I'm not sure how comforting that really is. It's one thing to talk about and study Jesus and what he did for us. It's another thing to live like he did, especially when it comes to welcoming strangers. I rather read theology any day. It's a lot less risky.

The writer of Hebrews makes an interesting statement. He says: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

To look around in almost any store with home décor you will immediately see that angels are very popular. And not just at Christmas anymore. Many people are very interested in angels and having them adorn their homes. The angels we see in pictures or figurines are always beautiful. The grown-up angels are dressed in splendid dresses, usually with beautiful colors and fancy fabrics. They have perfect complexions and have expressions of perfect peace and solitude. The other variety of angels in stores are baby angels—cherubs. They don't wear much, but they are so cute. They are round and sweet with charming expressions on their faces. Wouldn't it be fun to entertain these kinds of angels?

Well, of course, this is not exactly what the writer of Hebrews had in mind. This coming week and well into next week, we will open our church to a host of strangers. And, if I understand what I'm reading both in Hebrews and Matthew, we'll be opening our church to angels—to the very presence of God with us—to Emmanuel.

These strangers will not be wearing splendid clothing made of fancy fabrics. They will come in work clothes, clothing given to them at the last shelter, clothing they may have worn many days in a row. For the most part, their faces will not bear expressions of perfect peace and solitude. Rather their faces will bear the etchings of pain, struggle, fatigue and uncertainty. There may be children, even babies, among those who stay with us. They will be sweet and charming as all babies are, but we will know these are no fanciful, free-spirited cherubs.

Angels in the stores seem so gentle. They seem so benign. Entertaining these kinds of angels would be a piece of cake. No problem. The angels in the Bible seem to be different from these store-bought angels. Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament

get unexpected company one day. Three ordinary looking guys show up. They tell Abraham that when they come back next time he and Sarah will have had a son. What a joke. Abraham and Sarah are way too old to have babies. Come to find out, the three ordinary guys were angels—the very presence of God in their midst—some even think they were the Trinity. But, they looked like ordinary guys who needed some good old-fashioned hospitality when they showed up at Abraham and Sarah’s tent.

Jacob—Abraham’s grandson—once wrestled with what some have called an angel. Jacob is preparing to see his brother whom he had tricked and betrayed many years before. As he lay down to rest alone he has an encounter with a man—an angel—with God—who wrestled with him until daybreak. In the end Jacob is a changed man. He has a new name. He limps away from the encounter. He is humbled.

Sometimes, angels are not always beautiful. Sometimes they are not gentle. Sometimes they are not benign. They are not usually cute. It seems from the Bible that angels show up looking rather ordinary. They teach us extraordinary truths. They tell us surprising things about ourselves and about God. They change us—if we’ll let them.

I am convinced that the homeless guests we will welcome this coming week and next do have something to teach us. They have truth to show and tell us that we need to know. They will reveal to us surprising things about ourselves and about God. They will change us—if we’ll let them. We may laugh at what they say to us. We may cry. We may even limp away a bit wounded ourselves by the truth we’ve encountered. We will be humbled.

In Hebrews, the writer goes on to say to those doing prison ministry: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being

tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” We could certainly extend these words in many directions, to include: “Remember those who are homeless, as though you were homeless with them.”

I like what Tom Long says about this verse: “The church is not to engage in condescending charity but to provide a ministry of empathy.” The great challenge for us as we help others is to try to identify with those we help—as if we were in the same situation. At my seminary in Pasadena California, students in the School of World Mission were offered a course on ministry to the poor. One of the assignments was to spend a night on the streets around our seminary among the homeless people who lived there. Students went in pairs with no money to experience first-hand what it was like to spend a night on the street. It was a life-changing experience for those who took the class.

From Wednesday, December 3 to Wednesday, December 10 we will have an opportunity to remember the homeless as though we ourselves were homeless. Throughout the week we may want to ask ourselves how we would hope to be treated if we were in the shoes of the homeless person. How would we like for our child to be treated if he or she were homeless? Every person who will walk through this door is someone’s child.

Our natural inclination will be to judge. Our natural inclination will be to try to figure out this problem of homelessness. Our natural inclination will be to try to “fix it” or to “fix them.” But perhaps our calling for this week is simply to show hospitality to these strangers like we would show hospitality to friends.