

Hospitality to Strangers *Micah 6:1-8; Hebrews 13:1-6*

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Those of you old enough to remember Roy Rogers and Dale Evans from radio, television, and the movies may also remember that they had a very large family. Dale had one son, Tom, from her first marriage, and Roy had an adopted daughter, Cheryl, and birth children Linda Lou and Roy from his first marriage. They had one child together, Robin, and then adopted Mary, a Native American girl; John, a battered child from an orphanage in Kentucky; Marion from Scotland; and Debbie, a Korean War orphan whose birthfather was a Puerto Rican G.I. It was not only a big family, but it was multi-racial, something you didn't see much in the 1950s. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were at the forefront of international adoptions in this country and inspired lots of people to adopt. They had nine children, sixteen grandchildren, and more than 30 great-grandchildren in their old age. It's a good thing they were rich, huh?

The only birth child they had together was Robin Elizabeth, who was born in 1950 with Down Syndrome. Roy and Dale were advised to "put her away" in a foster home, but instead, they thought God had a purpose for giving them Robin, so they took her home. Although she died just before her second birthday, Robin changed her parents' lives forever. *Angel Unaware*,¹ the book her mother wrote, pretends to be Robin's account of her life as she looks down from heaven. As she speaks to God about the mission of love she accomplished in her brief life, we see how she brought her parents closer to God and encouraged them to help other children in need. That was the beginning of openness in this country to children with Down Syndrome. Children with special needs are not only not "put away" anymore, but they go to school, learn trades, and often live independently. The title of Dale Evans's book *Angel Unaware* is taken from this afternoon's paragraph from Hebrews.

The writer of Hebrews comes to the end of his treatise—it's more of a sermon than a letter, really—with a string of ethical exhortations. The first, "let mutual love continue," gives voice to perhaps the most recognized Christian virtue in the ancient world. A second-century Christian writer, Tertullian, claims that pagans often make the comment "*See how these Christians love one another.*"² It's not that the pagans are particularly envious of Christians, but mutual love is so characteristic of their communities that pagans recognize it. The word the writer of Hebrews uses is "love for brothers and sisters." That's why the NRSV translates it "mutual love," since in Greco-Roman society relationships between siblings were virtually the only mutual ones.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Angels unaware. Hospitality too is a peculiarly Christian virtue in antiquity. There are lots of Christians on the road in those days, some for business or for pleasure, but all of them talking about their faith. It is rather remarkable that the early church manages to evangelize the whole Roman Empire within such a short period of time—less than 300 years. It's not that everyone becomes a Christian, but by the time of Constantine, there are churches in every city

and across the countryside, too. First-century Christians (and Jews, too, it should be added) tend to avoid inns when they travel, because inns are notorious for drinking and gambling and prostitution—a bit like the no-tell motels of our day—so Christians and Jews rely instead on the kindness of strangers. They carry with them letters of recommendation and seek out their own kind to stay with while they are away from home.

You can imagine what kinds of strains that put on Christian households, to be open to any old stranger who comes down the road needing a bed and breakfast. The word translated *hospitality* means “friendliness to strangers,” and Hebrews is not the only place we hear reminders to be hospitable. First Peter says, “Be hospitable to one another without complaining” (4:9), and Paul tells the Romans, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (12:13).

Among other things, what hospitality looks like is solidarity: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them,” says Hebrews, “those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” It’s not simply that Christians visit people in prison and pray for those who are being tortured; they share those sufferings in their own bodies. It’s very much like what Paul says to the Corinthians: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). In these days of extraordinary human suffering and the crying need for hospitality to refugees and displaced people, we do well to hear this call from Hebrews.

It reminds me a lot of what the prophet Micah says. All the right religion in the world does not impress God without a just community to live it out. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” To do justice is to practice right relations: to give preference to the least, the last, and the lost; to put widows and orphans ahead of the rich and powerful. To love kindness is not just to be nice, but to practice covenant loyalty, a better translation for the word *kindness*. Sometimes it’s also translated “mercy.” To walk humbly with God is, as my students often say, to get over yourself, to be so shaped by the love and justice of God that you don’t worry about protecting yourself or your own interests and so can worry about protecting the interests of others, especially to show hospitality to strangers. Over and over, the Bible tells Israel, “remember that you were a slave in Egypt,” so you must treat each other fairly (Deut 24:18). Aliens in the land, in particular, are not to be cheated or harmed—or deported.

Grady Memorial Hospital is the largest hospital in this state and the public hospital for our huge metro area. You probably remember it. It’s a level-1 trauma center and has one of the best cancer centers and the best HIV/AIDS center in the southeast, but mostly it’s known for taking care of poor people. It was built in 1892 for poor people, and it has served the poor ever since. Over 600,000 souls pass through Grady’s doors every year, the overwhelming majority of them covered by Medicare or Medicaid or not covered by any insurance at all. I’ve been there several times—once even as a patient—and I never cease to be amazed at the quality of care people receive at Grady. And this is a public hospital, not a church-related one. Every staff person I have ever encountered, every nurse and tech and doctor and orderly and secretary and janitor, is genuinely helpful, friendly, and respectful. A homeless man who smells like a sewer and is in the throes of a psychotic break is treated with the same kindness as

a middle-class, insurance-card-carrying woman like me. I don't know how they do it. Perhaps some of them lose their patience sometimes, and maybe they all have a bad day now and then, but I have never seen it.

When I spent a night at Grady (It was no big deal; I fainted at church and the ambulance took me to Grady because it was three blocks away), I noticed a recurring sound at the nurses' station, a sound like harp strings being strummed. It took me a while, but I finally figured out that it was the sound of the patient call buttons, because when I heard it, I sometimes heard a nurse say, "May I help you?" Although whoever invented that call button system could not have intended the sound of a harp to recall Hebrews 13:2, it certainly occurred to me—but then, I'm a Bible geek. How incredibly appropriate that in a place where everyone is treated with love and respect, where indeed they never neglect to show hospitality to strangers, the sound of a harp—that most clichéd instrument of angels—should ring out when someone needs help.

It is not only in heroic, huge places like Grady that we are called to show hospitality to strangers. We can do it in small ways, too. In this season of uncommonly strident and bitter and ugly political rhetoric, when insults and accusations and vitriol are the order of the day, what a witness to the gospel it would be for us to treat the people who disagree with us with civility and kindness, to call out the meanness for what it is and refuse to participate.

As we are surrounded by an upsurge in racist talk and behavior, what would happen if we deliberately treated people different from us as though they might just possibly be angels? In these days when even churches are often torn apart by conflict and anxiety, what might happen if we "let mutual love continue" and feel one another's pain as our own? It is not only strangers to whom we are called to be hospitable. Sometimes it's more difficult to practice hospitality toward the people in our own homes than to perfect strangers—who may look more perfect by virtue of being strangers than the people we live with every day.

United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells the story of a congregation full of conflict and turmoil. Pastor after pastor left, declaring that this was the meanest church they had ever served. Today, though, that same congregation is an example of how the church can be a beacon of hope. What happened? Well, that congregation set up a safe home for women and children who were experiencing domestic violence. That ministry, welcoming outsiders, extending hospitality to strangers, helped the members get over themselves. One lay leader said, "The women and children taught us lessons in courage, faith, and love. We needed to get outside of church to learn how to be the church." The outsiders were listening for words of acceptance, and the church members needed to listen for words of faith.³ Hospitality to strangers changes us as well as them.

Notes

1 Dale Evans Rogers, *Angel Unaware: A Touching Story of Love and Loss* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1953).

2 *Apologeticus*, 39, 7.

3 Personal communication.