

## **PRACTICING OUR FAITH: ENTERTAIN ANGELS**

In this time and in this setting, among people like us, perhaps no Christian practice is more urgently needed than hospitality. Admittedly, that may sound like an odd statement. So much of the original meaning and power of hospitality has been lost in our time that when we hear the word “hospitality” we may think of something meager, like the Hospitality Committee of a club, or the hospitality suite at a convention, or those name tags that say, “Hello, My Name Is...” We may think of social graces, soft sweet kindness and making sure that everyone has something to drink.

Obviously, when I speak of hospitality as an urgently needed Christian practice, I am thinking of something richer, deeper, more adventuresome and more profound than that.

The Jews—and, following them, the Christians—took very seriously the need to practice hospitality. Hospitality like the kind Abraham and Sarah shared with the strangers who showed up at their door was not unusual or particularly noteworthy in their culture. Rather, it was common practice to offer hospitality to complete strangers. Travel in the ancient near east was such a dangerous venture that codes of hospitality were strict. If a sworn enemy or an utter stranger showed up at your doorstep asking for food or shelter, you were bound to supply it and to offer protection and safe passage as long as he or she was on your land. As Marjorie Thompson puts it, “All sorts of people had to travel at times through what might be called ‘enemy territory,’ which meant that hospitality to strangers was a matter of mutual survival. It was a kind of social covenant, an implied commitment to transcend human differences in order to meet common human needs.”

That is, when you are asked to provide hospitality for a stranger, remember that the next time you may be the stranger in need of hospitality. This time you may be the host, but next time you may be the guest. In fact, in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, the word “xenos” can mean all three things: stranger, guest and host. It is a reminder that you never know which role you may be required to play next.

Certainly we live in a time and a setting that is quite different from that, and yet I would say that our need for hospitality has not diminished. In fact, as I say, in this time and in this setting, among people like us, perhaps no Christian practice is more urgently needed than hospitality.

To understand why I would say that, I think we need only consider some of the elements of hospitality. For one, we are hospitable when we welcome someone to a safe place. To be sure, we do not live under the same threats as ancient near east travelers. Nevertheless, there are still so few safe places in our own time.

I remember Tim Devine telling me about when he asked a group of Senior High young people why, with all activities competing for their time and attention, they continued to be active in the church. They told him that it is the only place they go where they are not in competition with someone. What a striking statement that is. Wherever they go—in school, in sports, in other activities-- their peers are their competitors. In our time and in our setting, there is no sanctuary from the wearing, dehumanizing relentlessness of competition—except perhaps here. A phrase that they used over and over was this: “the church is a safe place.”

Some individuals are themselves a kind of safe place where you can feel safe enough to let down your guard and be yourself. Their hearts are like sanctuaries where you can take refuge. Henri Nouwen put it this way: “Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space... The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free, free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances.”

Hospitality like that—the kind that welcomes us to a safe and freeing place—is increasingly rare. So much of our time is spent with people who are trying to sell us something, or with people we are trying to sell something to. There are those relationships based on what we can do for each other. There are the clients and the bosses and the employees. And the people with whom we seemed locked in some kind of competition. It seems like more and more of our time is spent in relationships that are goal-oriented, transactional, or competitive. No wonder, then, that so much of the time we are just a little on guard. So our young people are not the only ones who need a safe place, a place of hospitality. It’s rare these days, and needed.

Hospitality, welcoming the stranger, also implies accepting differences. Will Rogers is remembered for saying, “There are no strangers, just friends I haven’t met yet.” But there are some strangers that we would not choose as friends. There may be a reason why they are strangers to us. Perhaps they are strange. But they are welcomed in and they are not asked to change. A host does not ask a guest to change. In fact, if anything, to be a host is in some way to express a willingness to be changed through your interaction with the stranger. That is part of the risk and the promise of hospitality.

It only begins with acceptance. True hospitality also expresses delight in the other. I am thinking of someone I will call Louise (because, indeed, that was her name). In my mind, Louise was the consummate hostess. From the moment you entered the door of her home, she welcomed you as if she had not seen you in months, when in fact you may have seen her in the vegetable aisle earlier that afternoon. Louise always seemed to invite people to her parties who apparently had nothing in common. Nevertheless, she would introduce us to one another as if she were sure that we would leave as fast friends. She would draw people out, as if each

guest brought a special gift to the gathering and most often the gift was nestled somewhere in the very thing that made that person different from others. You've known hosts like that. Imagine if more of our interactions with one another reflected not only acceptance, but delight in the stranger. In our time, marked as it is by deep suspicion of the stranger and basic distrust of those who are different from us, that kind of hospitality is rare.

Hospitality also requires something like spontaneity. When I was growing up it seemed like every neighborhood had one house where all the kids would gather. In my neighborhood it was David Blair's house. The Blair kids were popular, but that alone does not explain why their house was the gathering place. If you arrived at their front door at, say, nine-thirty on Saturday morning—which usually meant you were not the first to arrive—Mrs. Blair would immediately ask you in as if she had been expecting you. By noon, Mrs. Blair would have to ask one of her children to survey the household to see how many would be staying for lunch and then she would always set a couple of extra places just in case. I don't think she ever used the term "play-date," and I'm not sure she would have understood what such a thing is all about even if someone had explained it to her. Sometimes the stranger you are invited to receive is a neighborhood kid on a bicycle. But that requires something like spontaneity.

And generosity. I don't mean the kind of generosity that leads us to share a little bit of what we have with others. Rather, true hospitality requires that we begin to loosen the grip of those distinctions between what is mine and what is yours. I love our reading from Genesis. Abraham sees three men, three strangers approaching his tent. He doesn't even wait for them to arrive. Instead, he runs out to meet them and says, "My lords, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and a morsel of bread—just a morsel—that you may refresh yourselves, for I am your servant." And then, once Abraham is on the other side of the tent door, he says to Sarah, "Quick, get three big sacks of flour and make cakes." He takes a calf—the one he was saving for a grand occasion—and gives it to his servant to be prepared. Then Abraham takes milk and makes cheese. All of that without a pantry chef. When he is done, he lays the meal before his guests. (Mind you, this is before he knows who these guests are.) And Abraham stands by while the guests ate their fill of that "little morsel" he had promised them.

For the most part, we are not prepared to recognize the extent to which hospitality requires generosity. We are people who say in a thousand ways that good fences make good neighbors. What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours. But the hospitable spirit says, What is mine is yours. The hospitable spirit holds possessions with open hands. Understood in this way, hospitality is not a trivial thing, but the quality on which the whole of Christian ethics rests.

But there is one final reason why hospitality is so important. And it is embedded in that same story from Genesis. While the three strangers are eating that sumptuous meal—Abraham standing over them like an attentive waiter and Sarah in the kitchen listening to the conversation through the tent door—one of the visitors tells Abraham that he and Sarah are about to give birth to a son. For years they had longed to hear such words, but when they did

not come, they locked their desire in a deep place. Now Sarah is ninety years old. So she laughs. Right there, crouched behind the tent door, she laughs, as one person put it, at the idea of a baby born on the geriatric ward with Medicare picking up the tab.

Having delivered their message, the visitors leave. It is only then that the writer of Genesis says, without fanfare or elaboration, that the visitors were in fact God's angels. This is the story the author of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

For Christians, the risk and promise in receiving the stranger is that in so doing one might greet the singular stranger, that is Jesus. Jesus made it clear that whatever kindness or neglect we show to "one of the least of" his brothers and sisters, we do to him. "Oft, oft, oft goes the Christ in the stranger's guise," says an old Celtic teaching. Or, as Mother Teresa put it, she was sure that each day she encountered Jesus in his distressing disguise as one of the poor. Christian hospitality--this endangered practice--finds classic expression in the Rule of Saint Benedict: "All guests to the monastery should be welcomed as Christ, because he will say, 'I was a stranger, and you took me in.'"

You never know what will happen when you open your heart to the stranger, offer a safe place and invite the stranger in. And, by the way, some of the strangers who most need that kind of hospitality are the ones who live with us already. In any case, you never know what might happen when you invite the stranger in. You never know. That is the risk of hospitality. And that is also the promise because some have thereby entertained angels unawares.