

Sermon for Sunday 28 August 2022

University Lutheran Church, Harvard Square

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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let the words my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

One Tuesday afternoon, I was at my home in the suburbs of Chicago eating a late lunch when my faithful church office manager Kelly called to say: “Pastor, there’s a young man here from England who’s looking for a place to stay. Any ideas?”

Aside from the fact that this visitor was from England, the request wasn’t unusual. People often came to the church looking for help, and we would do what we could. But in this case, I knew the community overnight shelter was closed until October, the day shelter wasn’t open on Tuesdays, and the folks in the congregation I would normally ask to open their homes had just hosted a large group of Palestinian Lutheran teenagers the week before! So I said to Kelly, “Tell him to go to the fire station” and hung up the phone.

An hour later, sitting at my desk back at the church, the same man walked into the office. I went out to greet him and heard more of his story. Matthew was 20 years old and was attempting to travel from Seattle to New York—by bicycle—on just \$10 per day. He had biked 60 miles that morning and just needed a place to sleep before going to his next stop in Chicago.

I hemmed and hawed. I flipped aimlessly through the church directory, trying to think of who I could call. I looked nervously at the church member sitting in the office waiting for a meeting with me. What should I do? The last thing I wanted was a guest in my home that night, much less a complete stranger. But I said finally: “You can stay at my place.”

Now we could have an entire conversation about the wisdom of this decision, but my kids thought it was great. They had invited friends over to meet our exotic guest, and they all gushed, “He sounds just like Harry Potter!”

Over dinner Matthew told me more. Biking cross country on a budget of ten dollars per day means relying on the kindness of strangers for shelter and food. He told of the varied reception he received at churches. At one large inner-city

church he stopped to ask for help, but before he even got the sentence out, and without a hint of eye contact, the answer was “no.” He saw another person sitting in a neighboring office and asked to talk to her, but was told “She’ll tell you no, too.”

Another pastor happily took him home but then spent the entire dinner quizzing him. “Are you going to heaven?” When Matthew answered “Yes”, the pastor followed up with, “But are you SURE?!”

Fire stations were usually welcoming places, but one time he shared his situation and was told “Sorry, we can’t help an able-bodied male in good weather.” Another time, a woman agreed to let him stay at her home, but just as he was getting ready for bed, she said to him, “If you steal from me, I’ll kill you.”

Another host showed off his very large arsenal of weapons. Matthew commented to me, “We just don’t have guns like that in the UK. What possible use do Americans have for an assault rifle at home, anyway?” A very good question, indeed.

But my favorite story was of Matthew’s experience staying at a Catholic monastery in North Dakota. Matt was a chatty, outgoing guy (which certainly helped him survive an adventure that required asking for help multiple times a day) but this was a contemplative monastery. In other words, there was no talking. Matt struggled with the concept of eating dinner in silence after biking all day alone.

But the dinner, though silent was delicious—plates and plates of food. And then, one of the monks brought out the largest barrel of Rocky Road ice cream he had ever seen. The men didn’t take dainty little tastes, either. Matthew described them heaping scoop after scoop into their bowls, always filling his bowl in equal amounts. Although they couldn’t share conversation, the brothers saw Matthew’s visit as an occasion to celebrate. They didn’t hesitate to welcome a stranger into their midst, because hospitality was an essential part of their lives together.

The morning after Matthew’s stay in my home, I woke early to find all the dishes washed, and a \$10 bill with a note: “Thank you for sharing your home with me.”

“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13)

Was Matthew an angel? I think so, but not because he was particularly saintly. In fact, one may rightly criticize the great privilege this young man having an adventure exhibited, often taking beds that could have been shared with those who were truly experiencing homelessness.

But Matthew was an angel in the sense that he brought into my home a message I needed to hear. His unexpected visit—and the stories of receiving hospitality he shared with me—challenged me to reconsider the place of hospitality in our lives of faith.

Hear once again these words from our second reading today:

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The letter to the Hebrews was written sometime in the 1st century, probably before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Though often attributed to the apostle Paul and even to Luke, some scholars now propose that it was written by a woman, possibly the missionary Priscilla, who lived, worked, and traveled with Paul.

Whoever the author, it seems clear the letter served as encouragement for a young Christian community struggling to keep the faith. Internal debates were happening over contentious issues such as whether non-Jews needed to convert to Judaism before becoming Christian, as well as whether Jews should completely disavow their religious practices when choosing to follow Jesus. Facing such divisions within the community—as well as persecution from outside—caused some to reconsider the whole project. After all, although he was resurrected from the dead, Jesus still left them when he ascended into heaven. This doesn't seem very Messiah-like, especially when one had been expecting a king wearing a crown rather than hanging on a cross.

For this reason, the letter to the Hebrews can sound a bit like a practical list of things to do and things to avoid when facing conflict: Do this. Don't do that. Be like this. Don't be like that.

But it makes sense, in a way. Haven't we all wished, at one time or another, for a clear guide to life together? Guides I would to read include:

How to survive the pandemic. How not to lose your cool when your friends and family are supporting a narcissistic dictator. How to navigate an increasingly divided country and not lose your soul.

And Priscilla (or Paul) might say to us:

Keep on loving. Love by showing hospitality. Love by keeping your promises. Love those who are suffering. Love the one life you were given. Love God.

And remember: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

In other words, in a world that is rapidly changing and often scary, and even in the midst of internal confusion and strife, hold on to what is sure and certain. Hold on to love, and to hold on to Jesus. Amen?

Notice that showing hospitality is at the top of this list of essential practices. It's not merely a nice thing to do, it is foundational for followers of Jesus. Showing hospitality is part of the fabric that knits us together. It strengthens faith and creates community. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews tells us that when we cast the net wide and expand our circle, we make space for messengers of God—otherwise known as angels (or as you may have learned it first: “angels unawares”)

In May of this year (just before I visited UniLu for the first time) I was in Rome for an annual conference for pastors of international churches. One of the highlights of the trip was visiting the Vatican. Since 2019 there has been a life-size bronze statue in Vatican Square called “Angels Unawares.” It's a boat full of people of various ages, ethnicities, and cultures—refugees and migrants seeking a home. Springing from the midst of the people are wings, a symbol of the presence of the sacred among them.

The sculpture was inaugurated in the square on the 105th World Day of Migrants & Refugees Section. However, at the installation, Pope Francis said that it was not just about refugees and migrants. He hoped this artwork would remind Christians everywhere of the “evangelical challenge of hospitality.”

The truth is, showing hospitality is a challenge at times. As much as we would like to open our homes and ourselves to strangers every day, there are obstacles. Fear is one. Safe boundaries are another. In the case of refugees or the unhoused, are we called only to provide beds or to change the unjust systems that cause the situation—or both? What should Christian hospitality look like?

Here at University Lutheran, I've come to know that hospitality is truly an essential part of this community's identity. From the very beginning, this congregation has welcomed strangers into its midst—students and professors from around the country and from around the world. People come bringing their own ideas and backgrounds, gifts and talents—and they go out, sharing the with other communities. Can it be a challenge at times, to stick together in such a diverse and transitional place? For sure it is. But it's also part of the fabric that has made this place strong and faithful through many pastors, several renovations, and a changing world outside the walls of the church.

The evangelical call to hospitality is a challenge and a joy. And going back to the letter to the Hebrews, I would suggest that showing hospitality is also a form of resistance. By casting wide the doors and breaking down walls, by making the circle ever larger, we make the separation between ourselves and the other ever smaller. And this is how we resist the empire of fear and division. This is how we resist greed and the acceptance of inequality. This is how we resist a culture of indifference. This is how we resist hatred and death and choose love and life.

The Persian poet Hafiz wrote: "There are always a few men like me who are housesitting for God. We share his royal duties."

Housesitting for God. Sounds like an excellent mission statement as we begin this new season, don't you think? In our homes, within this church community, in our workplaces, and especially in the beautiful creation we have been given: to remember that we are housesitters for God, called to share the radical love and hospitality that God herself showed us first.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.