

## *Entertaining Angels*

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Genesis 18:1-15; Hebrews 13:1-2  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
February 18, 2024 – Lent I

Let us pray: Draw us towards your cross, O Lord, during this season of Lent. Draw us into your holy process of loss and renewal, emptying and being filled. Take away from us those things that keep us from you, in order that our hands may be open to receive your Easter promise. Through Christ, we pray. Amen.

During the season of Lent, Pastor Layne, Pastor Jen, and I will be preaching a series entitled, "Hospitality and Service." This is also the theme of the Lenten devotional, the entries for which have been written by participants in our congregation, and for which you can sign up on our website. We came to this theme from a couple of directions. One is our desire to deepen our *congregation's ministry of hospitality* at Lewinsville. Lewinsville already practices hospitality in remarkable ways – welcoming newcomers, caring for each other, making space for one another in our hearts. At this time in our world, when there is so much suspicion and fear and hostility, what does it look like for the church to deepen openness to others? The second is from the Mission and Service Ministry Group's Lenten Challenge of picking up a service opportunity, expanding the ways that we extend ourselves into our community, especially placing ourselves before the needs of others. And what we realized about the ministries of hospitality and service is that those two things are deeply characteristic of the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus' life of love to the world is characterized by hospitality – especially towards those who were held in contempt by others – and service – especially towards those who were broken and wounded in profound ways.

Today's texts, that Mike read for us, get us started on this journey. Hebrews 13:2 is perhaps the most concise summary of the ministry of hospitality in the whole Bible: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to others, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews invites us to hospitality with a promise, that also contains a warning. Others have shown hospitality, unaware that the ones to whom they were showing hospitality were actually angels. The implication in this is that if we fail to show hospitality, if we refuse to show hospitality to someone, we may later be surprised to learn that the ones whom we left standing outside were angels.

A story is told about a monastery that had lost its vitality. There were only 5 monks left, and they had no energy, no vision, the monastery fell into disrepair, and they were all waiting to die, at which point the monastery would close. A holy man came to visit the monastery, and he listened long and well to the 5 monks, gaining their trust. When it came time for the holy man to leave, as he was bidding them farewell, his final words to them were, "One of you is Christ." Then he left.

The five monks were stunned, for they knew each other quite well, and none of them quite lived with the complete and obvious radiance that they would have expected from the Messiah. But they had come to trust the holy man, and so they believed that what he said was true. They then began to treat each other with reverence and respect, on the outside chance that the others were the Messiah. "They looked for ways to serve one another and were kind to one another and shared with one another. Each did his work as a gift to the Christ who was among them."

Before long, passers-by began to notice that the atmosphere around the monastery had changed. There was a new lightness to the monastery, and a joy, and a level of radiance that flowed from that community. Each of the new visitors was treated with reverence and respect, and it all got started when the wise man told them, "Christ is one of you."<sup>1</sup>

In biblical faith, we show hospitality to others, not primarily as an act of politeness or etiquette, and certainly not as an act of exerting benevolent control over newcomers. We show hospitality to others as an act of reverence for the other. In biblical faith, the stranger and the neighbor and the other carry sacred value. They are understood to be ambassadors from God, whom we should receive as holy ones.

Hebrews 13 is built on our story from Genesis 18, where our ancestor Abraham receives three guests. But chapter 18, verse 1 tells us who the three visitors are. 18:1 tells us, "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre." Abraham shows them hospitality, in good Middle Eastern fashion, and it turns out that the visitors to whom he shows hospitality have a promise to give to Abraham. Generosity goes in both directions, it does not only flow from Abraham to the guests. The visitors say to Abraham, "In due season, your wife Sarah shall have a son." Up until now, the entire narrative of Genesis has been waiting for Abraham and Sarah – who at this point are over 90 years old – to have a baby, and now the entire narrative of blessing is moved forward by these guests whom Abraham welcomes.

In biblical faith, the stranger is sacred. Matthew 25 teaches us that Christ is found in the guise of the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, and the stranger, ones we are inclined to avoid and look away from. We are to see Christ in every stranger. In this view, Matthew 25 is not primarily about social action; it is about worship. It is about where we do expect to see Jesus?

In this view, the role of greeter here at Lewinsville is a role of worship, as you extend hospitality to guests as an act of seeing Christ in them. The ushers are in a role of worship. Whenever someone sits near you, you are in a role of worship, of seeing Jesus in them. Turn to your neighbor right now and say, "I see Jesus in you."

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<sup>1</sup><https://stmarymtangel.org/documents/2021/7/Fifteenth%20Sunday%20in%20Ordinary%20TimeCycle%20B7.pdf>, accessed February 2024.

Scripture teaches us that Jesus comes to us in the guise of the stranger, and brings us blessing, just as the angels brought Abraham a blessing in Genesis 18. When we meet someone else, when we greet someone else, we are having an encounter with our Lord through them. Turn to the neighbor on your other side, and say to them, "I see Jesus in you."

This changes the way we relate to others. We have a deep tendency to see other people as objects. We may see them as people whom we can use for our own benefit, people who may increase our prestige if we get close to them. Or we may see other people as threats that we need to defend ourselves against, or as energy drains that we need to protect ourselves from. We may see them as someone who will add value to our lives, or as someone who will take value away from our lives. All of these are what the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber referred to as I-It relationships. In I-It relationships, we see others as objects to be used, controlled, or managed in some way. Sometimes that's necessary, for when you stop at a gas station to ask for directions, you're not really looking for a deep relationship. But when our relationships are only I-It relationships, when we only relate to others as objects to be used in some way, we end up being less than fully human.

Buber taught us that I-It is not the only way to relate to others. There is also the possibility of having I-Thou relationships, in which we regard to the other – the stranger, the guest, our spouse, our children, our neighbor, our enemy – as a source of divine revelation, as an encounter with the holy.

15 years ago, I went to a conference at Montreat. I can't really remember exactly what the conference itself was about, but I have a very clear memory of the closing worship service. In the closing worship service, we walked around the room for about 15 minutes, looking into the eyes of each person one after another, and we sang to each other, "You are the face of God, I hold you in my heart, you are a part of me. You are the face of God." Some of the people we sang that to were people we had known for a long time, some were strangers we had just met, some were people who had gotten on our nerves during the course of the conference. Each one was the face of God. It was an astonishing moment of encounter and learning.

Friends, do not neglect to show hospitality to others. You may be showing hospitality to your incarnate Lord, who is bringing you a message of transformation and promise that will change your life forever. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.

Let us pray: Come to us, dear Lord, in the guise of others. Open our hearts and our eyes that we may see you in our neighbor, in the stranger, and in our enemy. Heal us of our woundedness and summon us to follow you, all the way to the cross. Through Christ, we pray. Amen.