

“Entertaining Angels”
Luke 14:1, 7-14
Hebrews 13:
Mindy Douglas
First Presbyterian Church, Durham
September 1, 2019

[**note:** a portion of this sermon is drawn from my readings in the book, *Radial Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love*.¹ I am grateful for this book, its authors, and the deep, insightful, and faithful stories that are a part of it.]

The title of this sermon very well could have been “Discipleship 101” for in this passage the writer of the Hebrews closes his long letter with instructions for how this faithful people are to live. The entire passage is helpful for us, as well, as we seek to understand what it means to be people who live together in faithfulness under God. As the Hebrews, we are called to care for one another with empathy and compassion, to uphold the integrity of marriage, to avoid the love of money, and to be content in all things. For this particular sermon, however, I will focus on the first three verses of this passage and what they reveal to us about how we live into Jesus’ primary instruction to “Love one another.”

The writer to the Hebrews urges the community of believers to have two kinds of love. The first – mutual love – is translated from the original Greek word *philadelphia*, the love of siblings. The Hebrews are to love their community, the

¹ Father Danial Homan, O.S.B., and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love*, (Brewster, MA : Paraclete Press, 2002).

ones known to them, their family of faith. Churches around the country are pretty good at that kind of love – loving the insiders. But there is a second kind of love which involves hospitality to strangers. In the Greek, the word used here is *philoxenia*, meaning the love of strangers.

Often in the church, when we think of being welcoming, we think of a smile and a handshake at the front door. Often *outside* of the church, when we think of hospitality, we think of a home, warm and comfortable and full of good food and drink with a smiling host or hostess waiting to care for our every need.

But if we look closely at the gospel, we learn that hospitality (*philoxenia*) involves much more than this. We hear story after story of what it means to open our *hearts* to others. Take the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Jesus uses this story to define for the inquiring lawyer who his “neighbor” is. The story reveals that we are *neighborly* when we care for those in need, when we show mercy to the stranger. These gospel stories tell us how to share *philoxenia*, the love of strangers. We learn that in doing so, our hearts will be transformed.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us that the way we treat people in need is the way we will be treating him: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was in

prison and you visited me . . . Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:35, 40).

Earlier in the same gospel Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Mathew 10:40).

So what does it mean when we in the United States close our borders to people who are hungry and thirsty, frightened and desperate to have a chance to care for their families and simply live their lives without fear? What does it mean when children are separated from their families at the border and denied basic rights? What does it mean when the US drastically reduces the number of refugees who can apply for amnesty, who are seeking refuge from war and violence in their home countries?

What does it mean when our LGBTQ friends are treated harshly, fired from their jobs because of their sexual orientation, or refused rights given to everyone else? What does it mean when the color of one’s skin alone decides what doors will be opened and what doors will be closed? What does it mean when NC shuts the door on health care for the poor, when we hide our hearts from the needs of others and slam doors on justice? It means we have missed the boat on *philoxenia*. It means we have turned our backs on God.

So what can we do?

Let us begin by acknowledging that true hospitality, true welcoming of the stranger, involves open hearts. It involves acceptance and love at the deepest level, at the level of Jesus Christ.

Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, co-authors of the book *Radical Hospitality*, write:

It is the door of my heart that these strangers are knocking on. . . When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything. That's pretty frightening stuff. You can't ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing.²

And that's the whole point, isn't it? We, who have come to know Jesus, have been transformed in our lives and in our living, will never be the same. We are given the strength and the courage to open our hearts to others in welcome because we know that we ourselves have been welcomed into the heart of God. Hospitality happens when a heart overflows and wants to share what it has received. In order to welcome others at every step of our lives, we must be willing to understand ourselves as loved and welcomed by God through the person of Jesus Christ.

Homan and Pratt write:

² Homan and Pratt, p. 16

It is possible to serve meals in a nursing home, to cook in a homeless shelter, or read stories to children at an inner-city library, to invite people into your home, and never let others into your heart. It is possible to do the good thing and end up feeling satisfied with yourself It is possible to do the good thing and not be changed for the better by it. Hospitality includes cooking the meal, and reading to the kid, but it demands that you let the people you are serving into your heart. Only in opening yourself wide to another are you transformed by the power of love. . . . Merely being nice to people [*will not do it*]. We must let the person stir us; we must connect.³

I cannot help but think of those of you who serve in our Walk-In Ministry. Many of us *give* of our financial resources to this twice-a-week ministry, and that is extremely important, but several of you also give your time and your hearts. Stop by on a Monday morning, for example, and see Marie Sappenfield, to name one of the volunteers, show *philoxenia*, love of the stranger, to everyone she meets. No matter how long the day has already been, no matter how many stories she has already heard, no matter the physical or mental state of the person she meets, she greets everyone with a big smile, sticks out her hand to shake theirs, offers her name and asks theirs. She welcomes them in, offers them water, and invites them to sit down with her. By the end of their time with her, after she has heard their

³ Ibid, 20-21.

story and offered them whatever help we have available at the time, she will often be seen embracing the person and looking sincerely into their eyes as she sends them on their way and wishes them well. She and the others who work with her will be the first to tell you that these encounters change their hearts, stir their spirits, time and time again.

I also think of those of you involved in prison ministry. The writer to the Hebrews is quick to encourage the faith community to be empathetic with those who are in prison and those who are tortured – “remember them as though you yourself were in prison or being tortured.” Jane Williams, Roger Kalthoff, and Kathy Krahenbuhl give of their time as a part of the Yokefellow Prison Ministry, as they meet weekly in Hillsborough with a justice-involved man who was once a stranger and is now a friend.

Yokefellow Prison Ministry is an interdenominational, racially-diverse Christian ministry of reconciliation . . . founded on the idea that people’s lives are changed through committed relationships.

Yokefellow is a ministry of listening, sharing, caring, encouragement and support provided by community volunteers from the “outside” yoked in

fellowship with those on the “inside” through the weekly small group meetings.⁴

Sounds a lot like *philoxenia* to me. . . .

The love of strangers as shown through welcome, empathy, and hospitality leaves us giving thanks for the sometimes-surprising presence of angels in our midst. We may feel helpless to change *the* broader and deeper absence of *philoxenia* in some of the laws and exclusions put in place around us, but there are strangers in our midst waiting to be seen, heard, fed, watered, welcomed, and cared for. Every day, there are opportunities for *philoxenia* all around us.

This final story begins with a woman at the end of her rope. The mother of two sets of twin boys under the age of six, she had had “one of those days” when the phone rang. It was her husband, who was calling to ask if he could bring home a guest for dinner, a woman from South Africa. His wife said absolutely not. No way. And she had lots of good reasons why it was a bad idea:

The washing machine had busted and she was out of diapers, so the babies had dishtowels pinned to their bottoms. There were no clean towels and the beds were stripped and all she had were soggy sheets. She explained that

⁴ <http://yokefellowprisonministry.org/>

she had planned to serve boxed macaroni and cheese and hot dogs on paper plates for dinner. She told him that she had not had time for a shower and did not see any break in her schedule for that particular luxury before midnight. What's more, when the dishtowels on the babies' bottoms became soiled, she would be stripping them down to naked.⁵

No, she told him. Do *not* bring anyone home, not today.

But her husband begged. He said his guest would love hot dogs and the twins and paper plates. In fact, the craziness of their house would make her feel more at home.

So that night over paper plates and boxed macaroni, the South African stranger sat down with this slightly out-of-control family and she told her story. She told the story of apartheid and hatred and her deep, deep pain. She had once had two sons of her own. But they had both been killed in the violence. Over the chaos of the household, around it and through it perhaps, or maybe because of it, she told her story. And they listened. She helped clean up, helped get the

⁵ Father Danial Homan, O.S.B., and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, (Brewster, MA : Paraclete Press, 2002), 222-223

children to bed and then sat on their front porch and cried as she smoked one cigarette after another.

“She was a child of God who had lost her way,” said the mother who had been so overwhelmed at the prospect of having a stranger in their home. “She didn’t know if she would ever go home again. She told me weeks later, she opened her heart to a white woman for the first time in years. She wasn’t the only one who was changed that night, though. I learned the stranger comes to me with the message of an angel, a gift to me that will change my life.”⁶

The writer of Hebrews knows this well. “Let mutual love continue,” but also “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Friends, in our lives together as a people of faith, we are called by God to show hospitality to *all* people, seeing God in the face of our neighbor in need, entertaining and connecting with strangers and angels without knowing it, whoever they are and wherever they might be.

⁶ Ibid, p. 224

It is a courageous thing [Homan and Pratt write] to keep getting up every day, and it is a much more courageous thing to rouse your heart and incline it to love. To care for each other, to open the door to the stranger, to open your heart to the stranger, lifts you up into the great dance of life.

What matters is that we stretch our hearts open and draw near to each other. It is the way of hospitality, the way of life, and it is, in the remote place where we have awakened to find ourselves, the only way home.⁷

Oh friends, it is a new week ahead! What angels, I wonder, will we entertain this week? To what strangers will we open our hearts? I can't wait to find out.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

⁷ Ibid, p. 233.