

Angels Unaware

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 and Luke 14:1, 7-14

Following the June shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, our friend Rabbi Peter Stein organized an event at Temple B'rith Kodesh, a teaching event providing the opportunity for community reflection. The event became even more timely because from the scheduling of the gathering to its actual happening the litany grew – police shootings in Mississippi and the Twin Cities, shootings of police officers in Dallas, and the tragic and horrifying events in Nice, France. We were ready for a conversation, or at least the next version of an ongoing conversation amplified by the moment in which we found ourselves.

Neither Rabbi Stein nor the rest of us who participated knew exactly what to expect, in terms of numbers or in terms of tone. Some 250 showed up, including some of you, bringing a mixture of questioning despair and hopeful resilience and a belief that when people of good will come together, a difference can be made.

Of the four people who offered brief reflections, I went first, and was glad for it. I went around and around in my soul about what to say, and realized that whatever the spectrum was, I was further on the discouraged and demoralized end, hopeful, yes, always, but not sure precisely how to understand or what to say about a path forward.

So I confessed. I offered my own confession. I said I confess: “Racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, indifference and complicity to poverty, indifference and complicity to gun violence, indifference to the plight of my neighbor, down the street and around the world, religious intolerance, or at least indifference of a deeper knowledge of other religious traditions and their beliefs and practices.” That is what I confessed.

Then I confessed “white privilege, in particular and all the forms it takes, as well as an overall sense of defeatism and fatalism that belies the faith that has claimed me.”

I am still somewhere in that place between despair and hope. Perhaps you are too. Clearly action needs to be taken – in our own city and community and nationally and globally. Every new day offers new headlines about the deep need.

But what also needs to happen, I believe, is some reflection on why. Why is this happening? What is motivating people, and groups of people, to act the way they are. There might have been more challenging times in our history, but this is our time and it feels so difficult.

I've thought, this morning, that if I only had a sentence or two to offer my remarks, I could. Rather than all those very real and insidious "isms" and "phobias," I would say simply this: I confess the sin of inhospitality. Inhospitality. I confess an attitude toward the "other," the "stranger," those who don't look like me or talk like me or believe like me or behave like me. Inhospitality. The failure to welcome, to be open, to add a place at the table when someone different enters my life, or our communal life.

Some of you might remember from your earlier years this verse from the letter to the Hebrews, in all its King James Bible glory: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares..." It sounds almost charming, doesn't it? Another translation: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Our own New Revised Standard Version is a little less poetic, but it makes the point: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The writer of the letter is attempting to establish ground rules, ethical principles by which this new Christian community will live. This passage is often criticized because it feels legalistic. And it can feel that way. Strictures on marriage. On money. But look where it starts. "Let mutual love continue." Mutual love as the basis for communal living. What would that look like? In your life and mine. In the life of the church? Our many communities? Mutual love, which leads to our angels unaware moment, and the gospel proclamation that "strangers" are not strangers at all, but angels, messengers of God.

What would that look like? What would it look like rather to take our very deep politics of fear, our ethics of separation and exclusion, behaviors which we exhibit – you and I – and behaviors that our society exhibits, that divide and categorize, and live into a vision of mutual love?

Eric Heen writes that the "demand to practice radical hospitality to strangers...flow(s) out of this sense that Christ -- God in God's own self -- is to be encountered in cruciform (cross-shaped) mission to a wounded and sorrowful creation, made holy by God's own reclamation of everything 'outside the camp.' It is no accident," Heen writes, "that 'hospitality' is in the... lead position in the list of the marks of Christian identity incarnate in service." We love others because God has loved us, and we are fed, Heen writes, as we feed and nourish our guests.

The word hospitality is almost inadequate here, but it is absolutely the right word. I know that you know this, but this is not about Martha Stewart hospitality, or the Barefoot Contessa, the right place settings and the like. This is an openness to the other, the stranger, in this moment

those who look very different from the person we see in the mirror and those whom our culture has placed at its outskirts and margins. Mutual love that welcomes, that calls us to change our attitudes and practices, that calls us to change our hearts and our spirits, and our laws when need be, so that hospitality can take on the form of justice and equity.

Hospitality that is about “them,” whoever the “them” is, the targets of all those “ism’s” and “phobias,” the target of all our fear and anxiety.

And it is also about us. Our hearts. Our spirits. Our table – this one made of wood and the table we set in our hearts.

And lest we miss the point, we observe a Jesus moment, a powerful Jesus moment. He has been invited to an important meal, at the home of a religious leader. They were watching him. He was watching them. And the guests, as they came, chose the best places at the table.

We had a wedding here yesterday. Jesus sees all this and tells a wedding banquet story. When you go to a wedding, he says, sit at the lowest place, the table behind the column or nearest the restroom. (He doesn’t actually say that, but you get the point!) Sit at the lowest place, and be invited to move up, rather than the other way around. He links humility and hospitality, saying, in effect, that the angels unawares, the strangers, the others, become the guests of honor and that those of us with privilege, while we will still have a place at the banquet, it will be a less distinguished one.

Humility and hospitality. That’s what mutual love looks like, the acknowledgement of all kinds of privilege and the insistence that not only are those who have been excluded included, but they get the best seats in the house.

“When you give a banquet,” Jesus says, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” and our current iterations of poverty and disability and discriminations of all kinds. They are welcomed. And we are transformed.

Debie Thomas describes this episode as a “revolution...not a revolution of arms and bloodshed, but a revolution in table manners.” “(T)his is who God is,” Thomas writes, “the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. Because there is no end to the game of who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out, and God in (God’s) wisdom knows that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation. Because God’s kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is one of abundance, where all are already welcome, already loved, already cherished. Because the currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear.”

If you've read the September church newsletter, you've noted that beginning in September we will celebrate communion every Sunday at 8:30 and every month at 10:45. If communion is good, more communion is better, and it will provide us the opportunity to do many things, including claiming our own place at the table more regularly and thinking about who else is there with us and who is missing.

That makes communion political and extraordinarily ethical, and links what we do within these walls to who we are called to be beyond them.

Who are the angels and who are the guests yet to be invited? Debie Thomas writes that "Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters — because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveals the stuff of our souls. This is God's world we live in...In this realm, the strangers at our doorstep are the angels."

So this moment, and every moment, takes us back to where we began — an opportunity to confess our inhospitality, when our privilege has gotten in the way of the ministry of angel recognition, but more so, an opportunity to embrace true table hospitality, where everyone has a place. Everyone: even us. Amen.