

“Angels in our Midst”

Romans 12:10-18 and Hebrews 13:1

Anne M. Cameron

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

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Third in a series on “*A Vision for Ministry*”

First we will hear from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Now we hear from the book of Hebrews. The original Greek has two very similar words, words that make sense in English. The first is ‘philadelphia’, which you know is the city of brotherly love. ‘Philadelphia’ means the love of brothers and sisters. The second is ‘philoxenia’, which means the love of strangers. We don’t have that word in English, but you may have heard its exact opposite, ‘xenophobia’, which means fear of the stranger. These closely-related words are emphasized in this one verse.

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

The Word of the Lord.

It is with great pleasure we welcome you this morning. Isn’t it refreshing to celebrate Christmas in July? The temperature may be in the triple digits, but we are refreshed by the presence of God-With-Us. This week with the children at Arts Camp has been a week with angels in our midst.

If you were not here Friday evening you missed something remarkable. Friday evening our sanctuary was full with nearly 90 children, their parents and relatives, and most of the 54 volunteers who made Arts Camp a reality. It was a noisy, joyful, and hospitable evening! It was an evening of angels and shepherds, cows and sheep, piano and

dance and handbells and Christmas carols from all over the world. It was an evening (and a week) that spread the gospel to many beyond our walls.

It is no coincidence that I am preaching on Christian hospitality this morning on the heels of our having entertained so many guests. We are in the middle of a sermon series in which we seek God's vision for our future ministry. This topic is one I planned to speak about later in the series, but it seemed like a good idea to move it to today.

This morning as we think together about Christian hospitality, we are reminded of the hospitality of the Communion table. We Presbyterians have open communion. Though we are not celebrating the Lord's Supper today, open communion is important because it underlines how radically inclusive we really are.

Anyone who hungers for Christ is welcome. We don't have a litmus test; we don't turn people away. We don't do this just because we are nice (though we are!); we do it because we believe this is what Jesus would have us do.

This is where we stand as Christians in today's secular world. We understand there is something different about being Christian; something that should mark us or brand us as counter-cultural. And this radical hospitality, this radical inclusiveness, is something about us that is completely counter-cultural and also completely biblical.

All we have to do is look at who Jesus talked to, who Jesus ate with, who Jesus healed, to see how important it was to Jesus to welcome people outside the usual realm of society. Whether it was children (who were considered less than people), or women (who were considered property), or tax collectors (who were considered sub-human), the poor or prostitutes, Samaritans or sinners, Jesus welcomed them all. And by both what he said and what he did, he told us we are to do the same.

We have become a nation that worships exclusivity. Exclusive neighborhoods, exclusive clubs, exclusive schools, "members-only" stores, gated communities, exclusive soccer teams---the list is endless. Exclusivity is seen as a plus, a feather in your cap, something to be strived after. The more exclusive, the better. And yes, even Christian churches, even ours, are often unwittingly exclusive.

Against this backdrop of exclusivity we see just how radical is Jesus' message of inclusive hospitality.

Inclusive hospitality does not come naturally to us. We tend to guard our resources; watch our back; fear the stranger or the one who is different. Even with the best intentions, we tend to pay attention only to our own small circle of friends. Xenophobia (fear of the stranger) dominates the way many see the world---both our immediate neighborhood and the broader world. Xenophobia runs roughshod over philoxenia just about any day of the week.

In both our scripture readings today we see how important the love of stranger is for the ongoing life of the Christian community. Hospitality is born of a grateful sense of God's abundance. We are much more able to extend hospitality when we know God provides for us, no matter our circumstances. And there is a practical reason for hospitality in the Christian community. People who join a church will not stay if they do not connect to others in the congregation. God's church cannot thrive without hospitality.

What does this kind of hospitality look like? How is it different from the 'Martha Stewart' type?

First of all, it's not about an exchange ("I'll pay for lunch this time; you pay next time.") It's not about expecting something in return. It's an outgrowth of our love for others, even others we don't yet know.

Second, it's different than just being friendly. It takes more time and effort. In the church, it means including people in our personal lives, not just learning their name and "passing the peace" (though that's a start!).

This morning we are challenged to consider three questions about hospitality from Stanley Ott's book: (paraphrased, emphasis mine)

1. Are new people welcome, truly welcome, at our meetings and gatherings? Are we actually receiving *new people* into groups?
2. Do we regularly include new participants in activities and gatherings *in our personal lives*?
3. When was the last time any one of us made a new friend (*a personal friend*) of someone we met in church?

No one said this was going to be easy! But we *can* expect blessings to come our way when we open our hearts and lives to others.

Those of you who have been paying attention here know we have just started a book club where we are reading good fiction that also

informs us of matters of faith. By the way, anyone can come! It's not just for members!

The book we're reading next is a novel by Leif Enger called 'Peace Like a River'. The story is mostly about the love within eleven-year-old Reuben Land's rather unorthodox family, but it is also about the deep and abiding hospitality born of a grateful sense of God's abundance. Now the Land family is by no means affluent. To the contrary, they are dirt poor. Anyone can see they are not blessed with material abundance. But there is a wealth of joy and love that drives single father Jeremiah Land to open his home to the most unlikely of guests.

Reuben worries about his father's generosity. Like the hungry, growing boy he is, he worries there simply won't be enough food to go around when his father sets an extra place at the table for the gigantic traveling salesman Tin Lurvy. It was Reuben's sister's birthday. Dad was making her favorite soup, red potato fish chowder. Reuben looked into the pot and was alarmed to see his dad had made only the usual amount! There would never be enough to feed a family of four and the giant of a traveling salesman!

But somehow, in something akin to a miracle, the soup was enough. Later on, that hospitality comes back to repay the Land family in an act of generosity that saves their day. And Reuben comes to understand they were entertaining an unlikely angel in the great hulking body of Tim Lurvy.

The question today is not whether any of us deserve a place at God's table. The question today is not about our comfort level with strangers in our midst. The question today is not whether they belong here, or whether we are the same or different from the people we worship next to.

The important thing is what we are all seeking. Are we seeking a divine presence? Are we looking to be changed? Are we tired of the competitive exclusivity of the modern world? Are we looking for a real, inclusive community where friends depend on one another? Do we long for a table where the hungry will be filled, and the thirsty will be satisfied? That place is here, and it is God's table. Welcome to God's table, and God's house. We know you may be angels in disguise. And most astonishing of all, the host, who is Christ, longs for you—all of you---each and every one of you---to be here.