

August 28, 2022
"Hospitality as Solidarity"
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 / Luke 14:1, 7-14
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

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

This text from Hebrews, as Eriks just read for us, includes some of the most profound verses in the biblical canon. IMO. In my opinion.

And all the more profound given the historical context of the letter, as we noted a couple of Sundays ago; the unknown author writing to a second generation of Jesus' followers, encouraging them to keep the faith and keep following Jesus' loving example in the face of heavy – and often violent – persecution.

The words land differently in that context. "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The notion of entertaining angels echoes both Jesus and Abraham.

We remember Jesus' teaching about the so-called least of these, found in Matthew's gospel, just before his own betrayal and persecution.

"'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels," have entertained Jesus, "without knowing it." Namaste, the divine in me greets, welcomes, shows hospitality to the divine in you.

And we remember Abraham, visited by three men, three strangers, three divine representatives – though he doesn't know it. When Abraham sees them he runs from the entrance of his tent and bows down before them. "My lord ..." – the Hebrew here indicating a greeting of respect given to one visitor on behalf of all three, but also the possibility of addressing God; though again, Abraham doesn't realize it. He offers himself in humble service.

"... if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that, you may pass on – since you have come to your servant."

He and Sarah rush to make preparations, ensuring that the strangers are well fed. And then comes the famous announcement, following God's direct appearance to Abraham in the previous chapter, that Sarah, even in her advanced age, will bear a son.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels," have entertained God, have entertained the divine presence, "without knowing it."

My aunt Molly and uncle Bill, who live in Massachusetts, have always been great hosts. Well, except for one time when I was three years old or so and they were babysitting. They were both fresh out of college, living in an apartment above the garage next to our house.

As my uncle Bill likes to remind me every time I visit, they somehow didn't notice that I slipped out the only door to the apartment, made my way down the stairs, through the garage and outside. And got far enough away, apparently, that my aunt and uncle only realized I was gone when a cop brought me back, wondering who could possibly have lost track of a toddler.

Other than that, I've always thought of them as great hosts. They hosted our family reunion last month, as they have hosted countless family gatherings over the years. A bunch of my cousins have lived or stayed long stretches with them along the way.

Before the pandemic we were in the habit of visiting once or twice a year. I've always been struck by their easy way of hospitality. Not appearing, as far as I could tell, to go crazy making ready for us, but taking seriously the invitation for us to "make ourselves at home." Make like you live here, make yourself at home. It's always felt like they don't drop everything in their lives or rearrange their schedules to accommodate, but instead let us fall naturally into the existing rhythm and flow of their lives.

Make yourself at home. As Emma Whitcomb Babcock wrote, as a matter of social etiquette, "To revolutionize a whole house on the coming of a few visitors betrays not only poor taste, but an absolute lack of character. Let your friends," – and I would add here, family, and as Abraham and Jesus and the author of Hebrews would add, strangers – "(let them) come into your life; let them see you as you are, and not find you trying to be somebody else."

That's hospitality. Make yourself at home. May you feel in MY home, in MY space, as if you were, in fact, in YOUR home, in YOUR space. And not only that, may you feel at ease not just in MY home, but in MY presence. May the distinctions between host and guest be blurred.

The Hebrews text takes hospitality further in that direction, further blurring such distinctions. As Jesus did, and as justice ultimately demands. Toward solidarity.

"Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

Again, the author of Hebrews is writing to those whose colleagues, whose friends, whose family members, have actually been thrown in prison and are being tortured in persecution. But the invitation to solidarity extends – as it surely did with Jesus – with all those who are in prison, all those who are being tortured. All those who are oppressed

and victimized and abused. All those who are marginalized in one form or another. All those who are hungry or thirsty, who are strangers, who are naked, who are sick.

Compassion and charity and hospitality, yes. Absolutely! But we are called beyond mere compassion and charity and hospitality to solidarity. The kind of shared solidarity and relationship, cultivated on the margins, that leads to social change. That demands justice.

As Gregory Boyle puts it in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, "No daylight to separate us. Only kinship. Inching ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship such that God might recognize it. Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away."

"Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them ..."

This is an extension of Jesus' summary of Jewish law – love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength by loving those in prison, for example, as if they were God, as if they were angels, as if they were me; love your "neighbor" in prison as you love yourself. Which is to say, not only love them as you DO love yourself, but love them as if you WERE your neighbor.

Your neighbor in prison. Your poor neighbor. Your un- or underemployed neighbor. Your homeless neighbor. Your immigrant neighbor. Your trans neighbor. Your hungry, thirsty, foreign, sick, naked neighbor.

Put yourself in THEIR shoes. Walk a mile in THEIR shoes. Love them as you would love yourself if you were in their shoes.

"In everything," Jesus says elsewhere, "do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets." That, of course, is the "Golden Rule," inspired by or echoed in every great religious tradition. In essence, do unto others as if you were the others.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hospitality says, "We WELCOME you."

"Let mutual love continue." Mutuality says, "We NEED you."

Solidarity says, "We STAND WITH you." As if we were you. As if we are you. No distinction. Solidarity takes seriously the profound truth that we are all members of one body; when one suffers we ALL suffer.

Solidarity blurs the socially, politically, theologically constructed lines between guest and host, between poor and rich, between foreigner and citizen, between out and in, between every way we manage to distinguish and distance ourselves from each other. Not to mention the earth itself, creation.

Solidarity blows up social categories and hierarchies in the pursuit of lasting social change, justice, common good, shared wholeness and well-being. Solidarity rejects categories and hierarchies, privileged notions of "deserving" and "undeserving," opening us up to new ways of being and new ways of being WITH each other. New ways of SEEING each other. New ways of standing together.

"Solidarity," writes theology professor, Marie Giblin, "includes compassion, but it is more. Solidarity is not only a spontaneous movement of the heart that responds immediately, but also a decision to take action to join with, to form community with, those who are suffering. Solidarity takes place when a person or community not only sees a need and acts, but commits to follow up, to endeavor to see that action is taken to improve the other's situation for the long run. Solidarity also includes a kind of mutuality that goes both ways in respect and accountability when the relationship grows. Solidarity becomes a two-way process because it becomes a relationship with both sides giving and receiving."

We are called beyond mere hospitality as welcome to hospitality as solidarity. Hospitality that travels. Hospitality that doesn't just welcome others into OUR homes and OUR congregations and OUR spaces and OUR turf, when visitors come to us, but hospitality takes that welcome on the road. Going where the suffering is. Going where the injustice is.

And going beyond mere compassion and charity, taking time and giving energy to STAND with others, to SHOW up and SPEAK up with and for others, to see them as THEY are, to meet them WHERE they are, WHEREVER they are, while also allowing them to see and meet us as we are, wherever we are. In mutual relationship, in mutual love. Until there is no us and them.

"When we sing together," writes philosopher Thomas Stark, "our hearts start to beat together."

Hospitality as solidarity, as union, with the divine presence IN each of us, the divine promise FOR each of us. All of us.

In that spirit, let me close with a poem from the Iranian poet and writer, Kamand Kojouri:

*They want us to be afraid.
They want us to be afraid of leaving our homes.
They want us to barricade our doors
and hide our children.
Their aim is to make us fear life itself!
They want us to hate.
They want us to hate 'the other'.
They want us to practice aggression
and perfect antagonism.
Their aim is to divide us all!
They want us to be inhuman.
They want us to throw out our kindness.
They want us to bury our love
and burn our hope.
Their aim is to take all our light!
They think their bricked walls
will separate us.
They think their damned bombs
will defeat us.
They are so ignorant they don't understand
that my soul and your soul are old friends.*

*They are so ignorant they don't understand
that when they cut you I bleed.
They are so ignorant they don't understand
that we will never be afraid,
we will never hate
and we will never be silent
for life is ours!*

May it be so.