

HEBREWS 13:2.

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

LEVITICUS 19:33-34. When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Sermon: Welcome

Scripture: Matthew 10:40-42

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

GENESIS 18:1-8.

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My Lord, 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." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to his servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

One of my friends is an Irish liturgical theologian, Siobhan Garrigan, she tells a story from her travels around Ireland researching for her book, "The Real Peace Process". Arriving at a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, Siobhan was pleased to be greeted at the door by two women church members, who seemed to invite her into conversation. Siobhan realized that these women were ushers of some sort, whose job it was to stand at the door of the church and interview newcomers as they arrived. They quietly asked her name and the first names of the other approaching strangers who wished to join in the morning worship.

Then Siobhan figured out what was happening. Hearing those names, the ushers would draw conclusions about the cultural and religious identity of each. Those with Protestant names were welcomed warmly and shown their seats. Those with apparently Catholic names, the Marias and the Catherines and the Patricks', were told that they were surely in the wrong church and sent them on their way.

I assumed that Siobhan must be referring to research done decades ago, surely no church would act in this way any longer. My hope was quickly dashed. This remains the current practice, Siobhan states.

This is a story foreign to North Americans like us, I reasoned, because it is about a faraway congregation of Irish Presbyterians, who are nothing like us at all, still fighting their Protestant-Catholic battles. Luckily, we have no such issues. Our society has moved past such discriminatory behavior. We have even elected

an African American president, after all, and knocked down all the walls and boundaries. In our worshipping communities, everyone is welcome.

Confronted with the unsettling image of that Protestant church on an Irish hillside, we want immediately to dismiss such boundary keeping as abhorrent to the gospel. Perhaps, however, it is more familiar than we want to admit; a barring of the door may not be as unknown to us as we like to pretend. The churches that we know would never ask the name of a stranger in some covert attempt to find them out and send them off to where they belong.

Nevertheless, if we are to be honest about the church that we know, we would have to confess that, though we define our borders differently, we define them still – just more subtly.

We are curious about education and profession. In a church community like the one I know best. The higher the level of education, the warmer the community will be. While none will be turned away, we will tell ourselves that we simply have more in common with those who are like us. The implications of such questions are quite clear to all. Not so far, really, from deciding if the visitor's name is Protestant or Catholic in origin.

In other communities, the query will vary, from questions about neighborhood lived in, to club memberships, to schools that the children attend. All of this is considered within the realm of polite conversation. After all, will the uneducated truly feel uncomfortable in our church? Will the less wealthy feel uncomfortable in another? Is there a dominant social or political perspective that one really needs to subscribe to, and that will prompt the community to be more open to the newcomer?

Is there clarity about the norm for sexual identity or family model that must be established before the doors of the church are flung open wide in welcome?

The Gospel lesson invites us to ask all these questions about the quality of the welcome that we offer to one another within the body of Christ, the church. It goes on to suggest that while we might find a reward in gathering only with those whose names sound like our names, or whose education or bank accounts resemble our education or our bank accounts. There is a cost to the kinds of exclusive behavior that too much of the church has tolerated for too long.

Jesus addresses the issue in the most personal of terms. He decides the love that families hold for one another, the tenderness with which we care for parents and for children. That tenderness and compassion must be our model for loving all who come into our lives, in Christ's name. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome none other than the Christ. This may sound at first like terribly unsettling news. The ushers at the door of that Irish Presbyterian church behave as they do because they have been informed by a culture of distrust.

Their desire to bar the door is born of the hope for security in their lives and in their tiny church. We are more like them than we care to admit.

Now Jesus arrives and says, "Take that love for family, that love for your closest community, and extend it, extend it further and further still. Welcome in the stranger. Welcome in the one whose life you hardly understand. Not to change them, but simply because they too are God's."

Dare we preach that this is good news? We can imagine that it is good news to those who have been previously shut out, those who in the past have been made to feel unwelcome – if, that is, they are somehow willing still to join in our song of faith. Of course, it will take more than a bit of grace for the stranger to be willing to risk approaching the church doors that have previously been closed.

No, the real good news is for those who have in the past guarded the door. Jesus insists that although we might pretend otherwise, we are not the gatekeepers of the community of God. We can bear that job no longer.

Our work is to welcome, to offer an embrace when an embrace is invited, and to give a cup of cool water for a hot summer day. Our reward, Jesus says, will be full indeed.

When Jesus said this, he was using a way of speaking which the Jews of that time regularly used. The Jews always felt that to receive a person's envoy or messenger was the same as to receive that person. To pay respect to an ambassador was the same as to pay respect to the king who had sent him. To welcome

with love the messenger of a friend was the same as to welcome the friend. The Jews always felt that to honor a person's representative was the same as to honor the person who had sent the representative. This was particularly so in regard to wise men and those who taught God's truth. The Rabbi's said, "He who shows hospitality to the wise is as if he brought the first fruits of his produce on to God." "He who greets the learned is as if he greeted God. If people are truly of God, to receive them is to receive the God who sent them.

We cannot all be prophets and preach and proclaim the word of God; but those who give God's messenger the simple gift of hospitality will receive no less a reward than that prophet.

Is it possible to imagine the homeless or the chronically hungry as bearers of the Christian message, who are in desperate need of our hospitality? Our immediate reaction is to insist on a clear distinction between those we understand as the objects of our charity and those who have something to share for the sake of our faith. However, many of the people who hold no status in our consumer society and come to us in need are, in fact people of deep and abiding faith. I have often been struck by the vibrant faith of those who are served. By necessity more grounded in the finitude and fragility of the human situation, they seem more intuitive in their grasp of the Gospel that we labor to believe. How confident and persuasive they can be as they bring their faith to speech! In the role as host we find ourselves strengthened in our own faith by these "Little ones" who carry no money in their belt (10:9), no health insurance card in their purse. They cast themselves upon us in trust, and so create a cherished opportunity for the settled church to offer a simple cup of water to its Christ.

Have we never invited a missionary to speak at our churches, a stranger, relating the message of God from a place we have never heard of, but we can still learn from that complete stranger who has nothing in common with us, but Christ? Lori has learned much from the inmates and the people she helps at her work. They have very little in common with us. A homeless woman taught Providence the meaning of doing as Jesus would do for 18 months. We weren't prostitutes, drug addicts, or homeless, yet she taught us the love of God.

Jesus sent these people to us, and we are to welcome them as would welcome Jesus who sent them.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Almighty God, you have taught us that all our deeds without love are worth nothing. Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the very bond of peace and of all goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

As we extend hospitality to others, we may well find that we experience new insights and hear new stories of faith that redirect our perceptions. Such witness can stimulate our theological and spiritual imaginations so that we become new beings. This is the reward we will not lose.

NOW GO IN PEACE!