***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER: ANGELS!***

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Texts: Genesis 18:1-15 and Hebrews 13:1-2

When I was growing up in Slippery Rock, PA our house was not only the church manse and our home, but also a virtual wayside inn for traveling friends of our family. There was almost always an extra place setting or two at the table for friends who were coming for dinner, and we had a couple of sofa-beds to which my brother and I were frequently dispatched to make room for traveling guests. A friend of the family joked that our prayer each night was, “Lord, let me wake up in my own bed.” Sometimes we did and sometimes we didn’t. There was only one motel in town – the Evening Star – whose best years, if there were any, had long passed (though it is, to my amazement, still open today), and so friends from across the years, especially college students returning for some alumni event, often came to visit for the night. It was never an inconvenience. It was always about hospitality, and no one was more hospitable than my mom.

That hospitality extended to strangers. One miserable, rainy day as my mom was driving home from the grocery store she saw a young couple walking and carrying all their groceries. She stopped and asked if they needed a ride. Romesh and Chandima had come from Sri Lanka to Slippery Rock University to study computer science; they lived about two miles from the grocery store. Just before my mom stopped, Romesh had warned Chandima not to accept rides from strangers in America because it wasn’t safe, but when my mom stopped and offered a ride Romesh was the first in the car. Thus began a close friendship with our family that has lasted more than thirty years!

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,* writes the author of the letter to the Hebrews, *for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.* It is one thing to extend hospitality to family and to friends, to welcome those you know and trust. It is quite another to extend such hospitality to total strangers. Yet such hospitality is a sacred tradition in the Middle East and throughout much of the Mediterranean world. The tradition is rooted in a time when there were few inns and many nomadic people. Travelers needed someplace to stay, food to eat, and often a place to refresh their animals. The tradition of hospitality met that need, recognizing that those offering the hospitality might one day need to draw upon the gracious hospitality of others.

Given that old tradition it might seem a little less odd that Abraham would jump up from his tent in the heat of the day and welcome the three strangers who appeared by the Oaks of Mamre. There is no indication that he recognized who they were, but he knew his responsibility – to extend hospitality to them. Not only did he offer water and refreshment, but he invited them to dinner, not yesterday’s stew but a fine veal dinner with cakes made especially for his guests. As they ate, Abraham visited with his guests in the shade of the old oak trees, and there amid that impromptu picnic Abraham learned the truth of those words written in the letter to the Hebrews centuries later: in showing hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Through the voices of those angelic strangers the Lord offered a divine promise to Abraham and Sarah – they would have a son, a seeming impossibility for the geriatric couple. But with God nothing is impossible, or as the strangers put it, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” The prediction of the strangers seemed laughable, but it came to fruition as Sarah bore to Abraham a son, and they named him *Isaac*, which means *laughter*. In extending hospitality to those strangers, Abraham and Sarah experienced the presence of the Lord and were blessed.

Have you ever been so blessed, not with the promise of a child in your old age, but by the touch of an angel in a visit with a stranger? Have you ever experienced a holy moment in a meal with a stranger – at a table at Valley Mission or Trinity Soup Kitchen or some other table? Is it possible that you were not the one blessed, but the stranger who blessed someone else by your presence at some time and place? Such blessings are not everyday occurrences, and sometimes the blessing is not apparent in the moment but only after the fact, but they do happen from time to time.

He showed up here at the church late one Friday afternoon and waited 45 minutes for me to finish a meeting. He had been on the professional bull-riding circuit and it had taken its toll on his body. Most of his bones had been broken at one time or another. He was heading to suburban D.C. to interview for a job as a ranch foreman, but his truck had broken down and he needed help. He had a huge animal with him that was part dog and part wolf, but mostly wolf. He had won the wolf/dog as a pup in a bull-riding contest in Alaska, and so I found a motel that would accept his wolf and invited him home to dinner. Grif Bonham came by for dessert, and over coffee the two of them told stories about bulls and rodeos and travels across small Midwestern towns, and Karen and I listened in amazement. Before he left he thanked me and showed me a Cowboy’s Bible, a version he had picked up along the way that had been helpful to him. He offered it to me, but it seemed more fitting for him. His visit was enough. *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

He was homeless, by all appearances – all his worldly possessions on his back and a well-worn sign in his hand: “I will work for food.” May in Indiana is sometimes like March here. This day was particularly cold, so the woman seated at the lunch counter and those who ate with her felt a pang of compassion as they watched the thirty-something year-old walk into town past the restaurant window with all his worldly possessions on his back. As the woman left the restaurant her conscience nagged at her; she felt a need to find this young man and see whether there was something she could do for him. After a couple of blocks, she found him on the steps of a storefront church going through his backpack. She stopped and asked when he had last eaten. “Early this morning,” he replied. “Do you have some work I could do for you?” She declined, but offered to take him to lunch. He readily accepted. As he gathered his things, she asked how long he’d been walking. “Fourteen years,” he replied.

For fourteen years the young man had been walking and working odd jobs to make ends meet. It had begun on a backpacking trip across the country. He had stopped on the beach at Daytona and found work setting up what he thought was a tent for a concert that turned out to be a tent for a revival; that night the young hiker found his life changed. He gave his life to God and found his calling in walking and sharing the Good News of the Gospel, handing out Bibles as he went and working odd jobs to make ends meet. “It was humiliating at first,” he said, “but then it became humbling to realize that God was using me to touch lives and change people’s concepts of other folks like me.”

As they were leaving the restaurant he paused at the door and said, “Come ye blessed of My Father and inherit the kingdom I’ve prepared for you. For when I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me drink, a stranger and you took me in.” The woman who had taken him to lunch said she felt as if she was standing on holy ground at that moment. He left a pair of worn work gloves on the seat of her car; she now keeps those gloves on her desk and finds herself in prayer each time her gaze falls upon them.[[1]](#endnote-1) *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

In an interview with Krista Tippett, Shane Claiborne told of a married couple he knew who told him that they were unable to have children. One day as they were walking through their neighborhood they met a homeless woman who was six months pregnant. They brought her back to their home and said, “We’ll figure this out as we go.” They got along well and she was still living with them when she gave birth to a baby girl three months later. Everything was going so well, that they continued to live together and raise the child. That was years ago. The woman who had been homeless is now a nurse; the little girl is a teenager. Recently, the wife of the couple who took them in was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She is dying, but she has a nurse who she has come to know and love who already lives in her home and is able to care for her day by day.[[2]](#endnote-2) *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

On a cold February night in 1965 an older African American woman was standing on the side of an Alabama highway in the middle of a lashing rainstorm not long before midnight. Her car had broken down and she desperately needed a ride. Soaking wet, she decided to flag down the next car that came her way. A young white man stopped to help her, an act generally unheard of in that part of Alabama in the mid 1960s! He took her to safety, helped her get assistance, put her into a taxicab and sent her on her way. Seven days later a knock came at the man’s door. To his surprise, a giant console color TV was delivered to his home with a note attached.

*Thank you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes, but also my spirits. Then you came along. Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying husband’s bedside just before he passed away. God bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others.*

*Sincerely,*

*Mrs. Nat King Cole*

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Not every encounter with a stranger is so angelic, and I am not suggesting that you go out and pick up all the hitchhikers along the road or invite the first stranger you meet to come home for dinner. Some caution and discernment is appropriate. But I am suggesting that you be open to the possibility of angels among us in the strangers that you meet. We don’t know who we might help when we help, or who we might meet when we extend hospitality to strangers, but sometimes it is an angel we encounter. Sometimes we may be the angels encountered by others, human agents sent by God for a divine purpose. If you never help a stranger or show any hospitality to one you don’t know, you may miss meeting an angel or miss an opportunity to be an angelic presence to others. It may sound too good to be true, but in the words of the strangers at the Oaks of Mamre: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? So, *do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some – maybe you – have entertained angels without knowing it.* Amen

1. *Angels Unaware*, First Presbyterian Church of Ft. Lauderdale Newsletter, December 20, 2000 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Shane Claiborne quoted by Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, Penguin Books: 2016, p.225 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)