

Pentecost 12C 28 August 2022
Hebrews 13:1-8,15,16; Luke 14:1,7-14
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). Let's pray:

Every time I hear this Scripture, I immediately think of an unusual event that occurred many years ago, a few years after Kathy and I married and were living in our first home in Queensland. Kathy was home alone and had left the front door open to let the breeze flow through the house on a customarily hot and muggy Queensland day. Kathy was going about her business when she became aware that there were other people in the house. A woman and a girl had walked up our front steps and entered the house unannounced. As Kathy looked on, they headed straight to the back of the house where the kitchen was located, and proceeded to help themselves to food and drink from our refrigerator. Then, without saying boo or acknowledging Kathy's presence, the woman and the girl left just as boldly as they'd entered. It was surely something surreal and strange for Kathy to muse over, I'm sure.

I don't know whether Kathy had entertained two angels that day, but they were definitely strangers. Kathy had never met them before and we've not seen them since. They were complete strangers who obviously knew their way around our house and were quite happy to avail themselves of Kathy's uninvited, but graciously extended, hospitality.

Kathy did all the right things; she simply let them be. We've always tried to live with the attitude that if someone takes something from us then they obviously need it more than we do. But thoughts that went through my mind when I heard about this, betrayed my usually charitable disposition. My initial reaction was to go into protector mode and work out how we could improve the security of our house without sacrificing the comfort it was designed to offer; to secure it so that strangers couldn't just wander in.

Admittedly, my thinking was shameful. There was more hostility than hospitality in it. And it was nothing like the hospitality Jesus is talking about.

This dialectic is captured in Jesus' *Judgement of the Nations* as recorded in St Matthew's gospel in chapter 25:

- In [v35] Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," and
- In [v43] Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me."

Welcomed or not welcomed, the mark and image of God challenges us when presented on the face of strangers; especially, those who "aren't the same."

This encompasses more than just unexpected refrigerator raiders. It's about migrants and refugees, the desperate, the destitute, the poor, the marginalised, the mentally ill, the Muslim woman and teenage boy, the homeless; all of whom, I'm pleased to say, have been entertained by this congregation. Great job! The mark of God is on the face of the stranger, the one who isn't like you and me. That's true about all those who look, act, and live differently to us. It's also true about those whose religious or political beliefs aren't anything like our own.

Maybe they're all angels whom God sends to us to teach us something about ourselves and about his kingdom?

Throughout Jesus' life and ministry, he opened his heart, spirit, and life to the stranger: lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, the blind and lame, the poor and powerless, widows and orphans, the hungry and sick, Gentiles and foreigners, the lost and outcast, the weary and burdened, those on the edge, those hanging on by a thread; even the possessed. No one was excluded. His love welcomed all people.

I want to be that open, that vulnerable, that free, and yet, I still struggle with the stranger. I think we all do. I'll give you a few examples:

- How often do you answer the phone when the caller ID says, "Unknown?" We want to know who's calling. We don't like surprises. We want the option of deciding when and for whom we'll answer the phone.

- When the doorbell rings, do you first look to see if you recognise the car in the driveway? Have you ever looked out the window or through the peep hole and then pretended you weren't home?
- Who do you usually invite to lunch or dinner? Someone you already know? We tend to invite friends and family, those already known to us, people with whom we're comfortable, those who can advance our interests, those who will reciprocate or pay us back. In short, we welcome those who are already welcome, not those who are unwelcome.
- Have you ever received an invitation to a party or dinner at someone's house and then tried to find out who else was invited? Would they be your kind of people; the kind of people you want to be with? Have you ever accepted or declined an invitation because of who else might or might not be there?

The world's hospitality is often conditional. The guests are already known, vetted, and welcome. Their names are on our invitation list. Other names aren't. We take the initiative. We extend the invitation. And we decide in advance the terms and conditions of the invitation. That's not how kingdom hospitality works.

In God's kingdom, hospitality is unconditional. The kind of hospitality Jesus offered and taught, means welcoming into our house and life the one who is different from us, the stranger. For Jesus, hospitality extends beyond "your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours." It includes "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind," those who are different to us and have no power, ability, or resources to reciprocate, pay back, take us out to dinner, or serve our interests.

Kingdom hospitality includes vulnerability and an element of risk, because it requires us to open the door even before we know who's there. However, I want to be clear about one thing. I'm not suggesting we should open the door to just anyone at any time. Jesus isn't asking us to be reckless with our safety or to invite danger. And I don't want our children running up to any and every stranger they see on the street. That's not hospitality, that's foolishness.

Friends, kingdom hospitality begins with opening the door of our heart. It challenges me to face the ways I've closed and locked the door of my heart.

When we shut the door of our heart and exclude the stranger, we also imprison ourselves. Strangers have a way of showing us ourselves and the doors we've closed. Hospitality is as much about who and how we are as it is about others. Instead of making a guest list of who's welcome, maybe we should first take stock and make a list of our own fears, prejudices, judgements, scepticisms, and cynicisms. This will help us to identify the locks on our heart's door.

Saints, when we take stock of ourselves, our hearts open up because the gospel sweeps in on the wings of the Holy Spirit to our rescue. Hospitality, which literally means "love of the stranger," is really hard work. But we're not expected to do it alone. In fact, we can't and don't. Hospitality is a gift that can only be exercised by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We don't extend hospitality because we have to in order to earn ourselves forgiveness or righteousness. Rather, it's because we've been forgiven, because we've been declared righteous and made holy by Jesus, that this work is pleasing to God.

As the people of God, with Spirit-worked faith, we're called to extend hospitality; trusting that Jesus, who was once a stranger for our sake, has unlocked our hearts by loving us, forgiving us, and redeeming us. It's only by the grace of Christ, that we're given the courage to be eager, willing, and ready to entertain the stranger in our life. And, we must rejoice in doing so, knowing that God is pleased with us for the sake of Jesus. As sure as night follows day, we will have our failures too, but again, for the sake of Jesus, God invites us to repent, as the prophet Joel says, 'Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing' [2:13]. In other words, God wants us to dust ourselves off, get back on the horse, and have another crack.

As we humble ourselves in faith by opening our arms to strangers and angels, Christ's promise is ever present: 'And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous' (Luke 14:14). You'll experience the welcome of heaven where no one is a stranger. You'll mingle with God's angels. And Christ our Lord will entertain you with life, love, and joy without end. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.