

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost: Hebrews 13:1-8

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Way back when I was in seminary, one of the things we had to do was find a local church to do our internship with. As you might imagine, in rural Tennessee, there aren't a ton of Episcopal churches just waiting for interns, so there was an unofficial competition with my classmates to scoop up the good ones first. This worked out great for me because I had no interest in the real big city churches. I wanted something cozier. So while they made sometimes two-hour drives in search of many pewed caverns of worship, I stayed closer to home and sought out the little guys. What can I say, I'm a country boy, and between fast walkers and parallel parkers, I'd much rather stay on my side of the barbed wire.

I went to a whole bunch of churches those first couple of months. One had a bare cinder block wall behind the altar and in place of stained glass, they'd squeezed colored wine bottles in a few gaps to bring in some light. Those folks looked at me and Becca like we had snakes coming out of our eyeballs -- why would anyone new want to come to us? Another church, the closest one to home, actually, was sweet looking, and the music was nice, but when it came time for the handshake line after the service, not a soul looked our way. It's not that we weren't welcomed. It's that no one seemed to know we existed at all! The third church, rumored to be midway on Al Capone's route from Chicago to somewheres in Florida, was so cute, and loving, and just, well, just a teensy bit too much. It was the same baby blue as my grandmother's dishes. The people gushed over us. And then one very kind woman in an apron shot her fingers up in the air as a lightbulb went off over her head. She rushed to the back of the Parish Hall, then came back and handed us her bounty: a gift bag complete with a frozen loaf of bread. Now she knew that what she was handing us was a little weird, so she explained herself.

Some time before, some kind soul had the idea of making welcome bags for visitors, so they pulled together their efforts and filled up bags with goodies like a newsletter and a sticker and a ballpoint pen with a broken clicker. But something felt like it was missing, so they brainstormed, and they decided that nothing feels quite as welcoming as the smell of fresh baked bread. So, every Sunday for God knows how many Sundays, someone made fresh loaves of bread and brought them, still warm, to the Parish Hall, and they stood diligently by the gift bags with bread smelling delicious and steaming and just waiting to be picked up by a friendly and hungry new face. But new faces never came. This church, mind you, was on a backroad that you got to from another backroad, and the total population of the surrounding area was about 3. To be clear, that's 3 goats. So, one day, someone decided maybe they didn't need to make bread every week. Maybe it was enough to make bread once a month and keep it frozen for just the right day, and if someone saw a newbie in the pews, they'd sneak over to the Parish Hall, pop it in the defroster, and then present it to the newcomer as if it'd been baked for them fresh all along. And then someone new kept on not coming. So they forgot to watch for the newcomer. And then Becca and I came along, and God bless 'em, they nearly forgot again. But they didn't! They remembered just in time! And I gotta tell ya, it was really sweet. It was. I still hold a soft place for them in my heart, but y'all, it was also just a *tiny bit* too much.

It's a tough thing, being hospitable. It's not necessarily tough to open up your life or your home, though that carries its own challenges. The tough thing, at least to me, is figuring out just the right balance of anticipating someone else's need without overdoing it. I have learned, for example, that it's important to warn my houseguests about the intensity of the toilet flush. But it's a little too much to demonstrate. On a related note, my old priest in Little Rock used to say that true hospitality is nowhere better shown than in high quality, double-ply toilet paper. I leave it to y'all to figure out why that might be. When we hear someone like Paul or Abraham or Jesus talk about welcoming the stranger or being hospitable, there's more going on there than just

toilet paper. One would hope, right? What's going on is bigger. You know, bless that little church's heart, they couldn't help but be excited. And I'm not sure I did the right thing in ultimately deciding to go elsewhere. They were lovely, and more importantly, they were prepared to welcome anyone at any time. That's about as radical as hospitality gets. See, what makes the hospitality of our tradition so radical isn't how good we are at it or how well we strike that goldilocks zone of enough but not overly much.

What makes our hospitality so radical isn't how adeptly we welcome, it's who we welcome. We welcome absolutely everyone. It's not about how good they are or the quality of their clothes or the amount of ink on their skin. It's not about money in the pocket or race or sexual preference. It's not about gender identity or even faith perspective. We welcome all. And we welcome all with deep sincerity. It's a powerful thing to be talking about hospitality here in our Memorial Garden. The McKays who gave that altar years ago were models of that hospitality. It didn't matter who you were, if you needed something, they were there. Folks, today we're fed from their welcome table, and we take that with us when we leave this place.

You've heard by now, I'm sure, that there are a couple of folks in need of welcome coming to Hamilton soon. There's the barista at FoJo's, and there's the Ukrainian refugee family. They're all gonna need your radical hospitality. Love them for who they are. But those are the easy ones to see. There's more, more folks that need your love. There's all those Colgate students flooding back into town. You've definitely noticed them again, I'm sure. But there's more, still, more folks that need our love that are sometimes even harder to see. Your neighbors, your family, your never-noticed-they-lived-there-before acquaintances, even your I-didn't-know-we-had-*that*-here folks that live on the underside. Love is in mighty short supply these days, and people desperately need as much of it as they can get, and they need as much of it as we can give.

Now, I do want to push on one thing Paul says this morning. Paul says we should welcome the stranger because, in doing so, we entertain angels unawares. It really is a good line, but here's where I want to push on Paul. Entertaining angels unawares falls in a long tradition of getting rewarded for doing the right thing. It was one of the unofficial official tests Abraham went through way back in Genesis. But I think we should welcome without some hope of reward or without some hope that doing the right thing'll come back around to us. We welcome because in doing so, we actually care for a human being that might not be able to do anything for us. Maybe there could be a reward, maybe in time we learn something about humanity and about God by loving another person, but we don't put out the good toilet paper because it means we'll get our crown in heaven. It's the same thing with church. We don't put on beautiful services so that more people will show up. We don't rally around the Crop Walk to fill up seats. I don't preach to burst the pews. We do all those things and many more because it's our calling. We do all we can as best we can to the glory of God and for the human in need.

I wonder about those folks down in Midway, Tennessee. I wonder what they're up to, how many untouched loaves of bread sit in their freezer. I wonder if they ever got disheartened and gave up, or if a hungry family ever stopped by and left with a year's supply of sandwich bread. I don't think I'll ever forget that little church and their big hearts. But I can say this: St. Thomas' gives 'em a run for their money. You are a good and kind and caring people. Would that all of Hamilton knew your welcome. Well guess what, now's our chance.