

*“Entertaining Angels Unaware”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 5, 2012

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Scriptures: Hebrews 13: 1-2    Genesis 18: 1-8

Hebrews 13: 1-2

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

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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> 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.

### ***Entertaining angels unaware***

Welcome home.

Bienvenidos.

Arnold Glasow said, *“Some folks make you feel at home.*

*Others make you wish you were.”*

Welcome home.

No kidding. We mean it.

We truly want you to feel and know that you are welcome here,

that this is your home whether for one Sunday morning of hope

or for a lifetime of service and lots more hope.

A strong and solid pastoral theme runs through this congregation,

one that has sustained thousands of souls for the journey of life.

You and yours are welcome here.

You and I will be received without judgment,

simply, purely, happily because we are all guests at the Lord's Table.

Any church splits we could have had over

open or closed communion, pew-seating based on race,

the gender or sexual orientation of ministers, elders and deacons,

or, heaven forbid, calling a preacher from New York City

have already been fought and won and lost.

They now grow distant in the rear view mirror.

We have moved on, thanks be to God,

and today we find ourselves living in an age of Christian hospitality.

Over time, with much practice and a lot of faith and sweat,

we have learned to live out the difference between "hospitality" and "entertaining".

*Entertaining says,*

*"I want to impress you with my home, my clever decorating, my cooking."*

*Hospitality, seeking to minister, says,*

*"This home is a gift from my Master. I use it as God desires."*

*Hospitality aims to serve.*

*Entertaining puts things before people.*

*"As soon as I get the house finished, the living room decorated,*

*my housecleaning done -- then I will start inviting people."*

*Hospitality puts people first.*

*"No furniture - we'll eat on the floor!"*

*"The decorating may never get done - you come anyway."*

*"The house is a mess - but you are friends - come home with us."*

*Entertaining subtly declares, "This home is mine, an expression of my personality.*

*Look, please, and admire."*

*Hospitality whispers, "What is mine is yours." [1]*

### ***Entertaining angels unaware***

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews

connects Jesus' mandate for us to love one another

with our ongoing practice of hospitality to strangers.

The author said, *“Let mutual love continue.*

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,  
for by doing that*

*some have entertained angels without  
knowing it.”* (Heb. 13: 1-2)

Clearly the author was channeling the story from Genesis 18,

the narrative of the announcement that Abraham and Sarai,  
despite their advanced age, were to have a child.

Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel and all of Creation,

had decided to pay a surprise visit on Abraham and Sarah.

God may have been concerned that

the promise of a chosen people might be in jeopardy.

Abraham was 99 years old and not getting any younger,

yet he and Sarah, who was also up there in age,

had no children of their own.

Genesis 18 begins:

*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.*

*2 [Abraham] looked up and saw three men standing near*

*him.*

So, God and two angels appear before Abraham.

*“When he saw them,*

*he ran from the tent entrance to meet them,*

*and bowed down to the ground.*

*3 He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.*

*4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet,*

*and rest yourselves under the tree.*

*5 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.”*

*(Genesis 18: 1-5)*

Did Abraham recognize that the holy was in his midst?

Or is this how he treated all wayfaring travelers?

Notice that he is deferential.

Notice that the scene is being set for something important is about to happen.

In a few minutes the focus will swing from Abraham to the visitors,

one of whom will announce that Sarah will have a son.

She will laugh and the story goes on

and the promise of God is fulfilled yet once again.

Afterward the angels will visit the nearby towns of Sodom and Gomorrah,

where they will not be treated anywhere nearly as hospitably  
as they were in the tent of Abraham and Sarah.

Allow me to point out that for way too many generations

we – the Church of Jesus Christ – has missed the boat  
on correct teaching about the sin of the citizens of  
Sodom and Gomorrah.

Their sin, the errors of their ways, was to neglect to practice  
hospitality.

The biblical fact is that angels entered into their community  
and were treated poorly, rudely, harmfully, shamefully.

The judgment of God that followed

was not for any particular sexual practice  
but rather for the citizens' refusal to practice hospitality for  
God's beloved.

Remember that fact, please, the next time you hear

someone using the Lord's word in vain to cast aspersions or  
castigate neighbors.

Let's back up and return to Abraham's response to the travelers.

Did he react as he did because he knew it was God,

or was this his normal operating procedure for all newcomers?

Should it matter?

Does it ever really matter?

When we say or overhear the word *Namaste*,

what is being expressed is “the holy in me recognizes the holy in you.”

We are all angels, and we are all hosts.

We all need someone to love us and welcome us into their life, their home, their church.

At the core of the practice of hospitality is love.

Tradition has it that the disciple John lived longer

than any other disciple of Christ.

They say that when he was old

he would be carried on a mat to visit house churches.

In worship he would stand on his feet

and say three words: “*Love one another.*”

### ***Entertaining angels unaware***

In the Hebrew Scriptures we find a variety of stories and psalms

that encourage us to love one another and to practice hospitality in community.



We are richly blessed with the story in First Kings

about Elijah and the widow and her son.

The prophet Elijah was hungry and wandering

during a terrific drought and famine

when he arrived at the home of a widow and her son

on the outskirts of town.

Even though they had very little to spare,

a place was made for him.

The widow and her son's act of hospitality and generosity

resulted in God's blessing their home

with a boundless supply of what all three would need to live.

That is why we say, when unexpected company enters your home,

you "set a place for Elijah."

My family lived in Spanish Harlem in New York City.

We were intimately acquainted with scarcity and generosity,

experiencing both in our own home and our community.

So our family of six set a seventh place at the dinner table for Elijah,

and invariably the extra seat and plate and silverware would be used.

Elijah, I can testify, has many faces, names, needs and hopes.

One fellow from Ecuador was a barber,  
and he thanked – and surprised – my parents  
by giving all four sons free crew cuts.

*(Mother was furious, and the barber was so pleased! What could she say?!)*

We never worried about portions; there was always enough.

No one ever left the table hungry,

and if our dinner helpings were somewhat smaller than the night before,

the lively conversation more than made up for the lack of seconds.

Another Elijah, this one from Tennessee, happily graced our table most every night

as he conducted a law internship in NYC.

The year was 1973, and that summer the price of beef skyrocketed.

Throughout that hot summer

we ate chicken in all its glorious and varied forms.

Towards August our soft-spoken guest smiled and said in his Memphis accent,

*“Mrs. Calvert, this morning on the way to work*

*I noticed something tingling on my back.*

*I felt behind my shoulders and you know what I found?*

*Little wings! Little wings were sprouting!”*

Mrs. Calvert understood perfectly well what the young prophet was saying,

and for the next few days poultry was stricken from the menu.

In our home “set a place for Elijah” ran parallel to “the Lord will provide.”

Yes, the Lord does provide,

even and especially when entertaining angels unaware.

### ***Entertaining angels unaware***

A Swahili proverb states:

*“Treat your guest as a guest for two days; on the third day, give him a hoe.”*

Welcome home.

Welcome home to a church where everyone is a guest of Christ,

and where everyone is given opportunities to serve and love and be.

Everyone has something to offer to our collective effort to better the world.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed this, saying:

*And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness.*

*If you want to be important—wonderful.*

*If you want to be recognized—wonderful.*

*If you want to be great—wonderful.*

*But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.*

*That's a new definition of greatness.*

*And this morning, the thing that I like about it:*

*by giving that definition of greatness,*

*it means that everybody can be great,*

*because everybody can serve.*

*You don't have to have a college degree to serve.*

*You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.*

*You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve.*

*You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve.*

*You don't have to know*

*the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.*

*You only need a heart full of grace,*

*a soul generated by love.*

*And you can be that servant.[2]*

This is what God whispers into our souls.

*Su casa es mi casa.*

Your home is my home.

Oh, by the way, did you hear about the plaque on the door

on the social club in Las Piedras, Mexico?

The door plaque reads, *“For members and non-members only.”*

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

## Communion Invitation

“When we come to the Lord’s Table,

we are meant to see the bigger picture of God’s love and sacrifice.

This meal represents a welcome table

that is set for all who confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

It is also set for those who want to meet Jesus,

even for the first time,

and discover for themselves the goodness of God.

Jesus invites us all in, saints and sinners alike,

and then uses this meal to bring us together.

Our Savior doesn’t worry about the little details of our life.

Jesus is concerned about the bigger matters,

like forgiveness and salvation, like reconciliation and redemption,

like being love and sharing grace upon grace,  
that are offered in this Bread of Life and Cup of the New  
Covenant.”

The Table is set. Come to the feast, and know that the Lord is God.

(paraphrased from Jason Gottman, The Journal of Worship Resources,  
Pentecost II, 2008 Issue, p. 23)

[1] Karen Mains, Open Heart, Open Home, (Elgin, IL: Cook, 1976)]

[2] Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Drum Major Instinct”, Ebenezer  
Baptist Church, February 4, 1968.