

“Entertaining Angels Unaware”

Hearts Abound! Sermon Series

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 19, 2016

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Scriptures: Hebrews 13: 1-2 Genesis 18: 1-8 Genesis 19: 1-16

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. ² 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. 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.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ 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.

Genesis 19

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the square.” ³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two

daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.”⁹ But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down.¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

¹² Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place.”¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.”¹⁴ So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up, get out of this place; for the Lord is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.¹⁵ When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.”¹⁶ But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city.

Entertaining angels unaware

Welcome home!

Bienvenidos!

Kon'nichiwa!

Aloha!

As-salāmu ‘alaykum!

Hodi!

G'day Mate!

Arnold Glasow: *“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 into an awakening
of what it means to practice and preach radical 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, three beings arrive, God and two angels, who appear before

Abraham.

*“When [Abraham] saw them,
he ran from the tent entrance to meet them,
and bowed down to the ground.*

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

*⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet,
and rest yourselves under the tree.*

*⁵Let 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.

Entertaining angels unaware

When I was growing up in NYC my family entertained many angels.

We called it “setting a place for Elijah.”

One such angel came from Tennessee.

He 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 “setting a place for Elijah” ran parallel to “the Lord will provide.”

Yes, the Lord does provide,

even and especially when ***entertaining angels unaware.***

Lot also received two travelers.

We are told in Genesis 19 that two strangers appeared to Lot.

They were angels of God, messengers of grace, bearers of truth.

Please do not imagine these angels as having flowing white robes, golden halos,
elegant wings, and strumming on a cute little harp.

“They looked entirely human; nothing in their appearance alarms Lot

or gives any indication that they are heavenly beings.” [2]

It is important that we read and receive them to be regular, normal human

beings

as they were received and understood by Lot and his neighbors.

This tale is about hospitality, about offering welcome and refuge,

especially to the vulnerable.

“...And in the ancient world, to be on the road and unknown made you vulnerable.” [3]

God had sent the two messengers to scout out
why and where and when visitors to the region
were being mistreated, particularly those who were the most
vulnerable,

the widows and orphans, the travelers and the destitute.

They entered the home of Lot and the city of Sodom and Gomorrah
as “the least of these, as Jesus would say,

as representatives of the holy. [4]

Lot’s wife prepared food and their family made them welcome.

*4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom,
both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house;
5 and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight?
Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.”*

Entertaining angels unaware

This is a tale, a sad, sad tale that arose out of a culture of violence.

The whole town showed up, all the men, from the young to the old, came out.

This a vivid picture of a culture of violence, where violence is glorified.

It was not so long ago when the white population of American towns
showed up to participate in and watch

the lynching of one or more African American citizens.

Photos were taken of townspeople posing by the desecrated
deceased,

photos that were mass produced and sold as post cards

and mailed in the US Mail and put on display in American homes.

Postcards displayed by homeowners who prayed to Jesus and went
to church.

Violence became a pastime; a cultural experience;
one glorified and justified by churchgoing folks.

Such was the culture of Sodom.

The men of Sodom came to do violence against the angels, the visitors, the
guests.

They came to do so against the will of the host and the guests.

A scant 41 years ago, in 1975, Susan Brownmiller’s book *Against Our Will*
broke new ground with her observation that rape is a crime of violence,

one used primarily by men against women

with the intent to instill fear, to intimidate, and to
oppress.

Her viewpoint shook world as we knew it;
previously rape was considered a crime of lust or sexuality,

one of seduction or something for which the victim was blamed.

Brownmiller compared the violence of rape to the lynching of one
race by another,

which was done with the intent to instill fear, to intimidate, and to oppress.

Just as racial lynching eventually across the board

became socially unacceptable and then illegal,

today we acknowledge that rape is a crime of violence,
of one person’s intent to abuse his power,

to intimidate and frighten and harm the
vulnerable.

If only, if only we could dismiss Genesis 19,
dismiss the plan to use rape as a weapon,
dismiss it as ancient history, as a fable, a myth, an old wives' tale,
a tale with no modern relevance or applicability.
And yet we know there is truth here before us.
We have seen such atrocities within the lives of today's
generations,
from the Rape of Nanking to the awfulness in Bosnia and Kosovo,
from the violation of women and children in Rwanda, Dafar, &
Zimbabwe
to South, Central and North America's unspeakable
incidents
on our own home front.

This is the core meaning of this biblical passage:

Men young and old in a local community sought to wield their power
over and against strangers in their midst,
and their chosen vehicle was violence and rape.

Entertaining angels unaware

Lot sought to protect his guests.
He even offered up his daughters.
This is not a tale for the faint of heart.
But the crowd yelled for him to stand aside.
I think Harper Lee read Genesis 19.
Remember the part in To Kill a Mockingbird, when lonely Atticus Finch
is sitting on a chair under a light in front of a small town jail,
protecting an innocent man
while a lynch mob prepares to do in the accused?
Suddenly Atticus Finch's youngest, Scout, a girl of nine,
runs into the circle of light and men.
If Atticus had offered them his daughter to save the accused,
To Kill a Mockingbird would have been a very different book.
Instead what happens is that the child Scout, of all people,
identifies a man in the mob,
and she shames him into remembering his own humanity.
She shames the mob of men young and old into backing up, backing
off, backing away.

Entertaining angels unaware

*“But the men inside reached out their hands
and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.
“And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house,
both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.*

I see nothing here about sexual orientation, about being straight or gay;
I do see that there is much here about abuse of power.
There is nothing here about “appropriate” or “inappropriate” love;
there is much here about disrespecting God's angels in our midst,
about abusing people against their will,

about being inhospitable to the vulnerable.

The tragedy of Sodom and Gomorrah *in the Bible* concludes with the escape of Lot and the destruction of the cities.

The tragedy of Sodom and Gomorrah *in the Church* continues with biblical misinterpretation

used to justify the persecution of the vulnerable.

Allow me to point out that for way too many generations we – the Church of Jesus Christ – have missed the boat

on correct teaching about the sin of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Their sin – our sin -- the errors of our ways, has been to neglect to practice hospitality.

The biblical fact is that angels of all shapes and sizes and orientations have entered into faith communities

and been treated poorly, rudely, harmfully, shamefully.

The judgment of God that followed the confrontation at Lot's front door

was not for any particular sexual practice or approach to human love

but rather for the citizens' refusal to practice hospitality for God's beloved

and to wield their power to abuse and misuse the vulnerable.

Remember that fact, please, the next time you hear

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

Remember that the next time we are tempted to turn to anger or violence to harm our LGBT neighbors, and selves, and visitors, and angels of mercy.

Remember that the next time this or any religion

claims falsely that the God of Love's Holy Scriptures

grant permission for followers to be prejudiced,

or racist, or sexist, or homophobic, or xenophobic.

Recently I happily shared with Linda McCrae, a fellow

Disciple of Christ,

that our congregation is open & accepting; here all people are made welcome.

She asked if we are open and affirming,

whether we have together made public a faith statement to that fact.

No, there is no need, because we love and accept all people, I said.

She pointed out that teenagers and young adults who are lesbian or gay,

transgender or questioning, and are seeking to figure out their true self

would love to turn to the church, to God, to Jesus' love,

for support and nurture, guidance and grace.

However when our most vulnerable youth *do* look at and to

and for the church,

what they see instead is judgment and condemnation.

She said that these same youth are prime candidates for running away,

for self doubt, for self destruction, for attempts at suicide.

Those who desperately need the love of God feel rejected by God and God's people.

If ever there was a reason to declare ourselves open and affirming,

it would not be because I need us to be or you need us to be
or we who are comfortable and at home in the church need it to be
so.

We who have power to wield and share are called by the Holy Spirit
to use it for love,
because in our fair city there is one life, one soul, one child of God
who needs to know that God loves him or her, and we do, too.
One soul is sufficient for the world to become open and affirming of
all, for all means all.

Entertaining angels unaware

“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)

One day a delightful festival took place in a city park.
The park was centrally located in a neighborhood where many gay
and lesbian and transgender families took refuge and found safety in numbers.
In this festival was an odd booth .
Above the booth were the words “CONFESSONAL.”
There were two doors.
On one door it simple said, “WELCOME HOME. COME INSIDE.”
Folks passing by were curious.
A few got up the courage to open the door and enter in.
There was a wooden chair by a small window in the wall
that separated the two sides of the booth.
The visitor sitting in the chair could see a clergyperson sitting in the other side.

Immediately the clergy said,
*“Please listen to my confessional.
I need to confess my sin. I am so sorry.
We the Church of Jesus Christ have intentionally and repeatedly hurt you, abused you.
We have wielded our power against your will,
especially when you were at your most vulnerable.
I pray that you might find it in your heart to forgive the Church,
and that we might move into a new day and new way together,
freed from past sins of intimidation, instillation of fear, an oppression.
May we be released from the violence and wrongs of our past,
and may we move together into the light of God’s grace, mercy, and justice.
Thank you for listening.”*

Some left the confessional booth and walked into the sunshine amazed;
some left cynical;
some left transformed, inspired, hopeful;
some left with some thinking to do.

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] Hearts Abound! Bible Study, Genesis 19: 1-25. Page 10.

[3] Ibid. Page 10.

[4] Ibid. Page 12.