

Engage

Hebrews 13:1-2

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It is still stewardship season.

Now is the time when people in church start to wonder what additional pearls of wisdom the preacher can possibly have up his or her sleeve.

We've already talked about our theme – “Engage” – it's a great description of what we think God is calling us to do with the collective stewardship effort of this congregation – engage in deeper ways around mission and care and Christian formation.

We've already been direct about how important it is to make this church your number one giving priority – because while there are lots of great organizations in this city and in this country – none of the rest of them are *your church* that does its work under the banner of Jesus Christ.

We're three weeks into a stewardship based Sunday School class – around biblical understandings of stewardship, and the spiritual practice of stewardship, and the ways the church is called to be a good steward of the money it receives from its members.

What else is there to say?

Well...lots. But today we are going to focus on something that exists outside a budget line-item or a program area – and yet we are going to focus on something that is central to who we are as a congregation and who God calls us to be: the practice of hospitality. Being a place of welcome is perhaps the most effective way to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ. And make no mistake – our practice of generosity is connected to our practice of hospitality.

Our second scripture reading is short. It follows one of the most beloved and famous chapters in the Letter to the Hebrews – where those of us who are connected in our common faith are assured of the fact that we are “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” and then encouraged to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

Immediately after that chapter, the writer of Hebrews speaks these words. Listen with me for the word of God – a word that is spoken, not to individuals in the faith, but to the community of faith we call the church:

Let mutual love continue.

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

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Before we get to hospitality, let's pause for a minute and talk about angels.

What's that, Preacher? Angels?
Yes – angels.

What do you think about angels?
Do you believe they are real?
Do you think the writer of Hebrews is speaking in metaphor?
Would it make you squirm in your pew if I told you that the writer of Hebrews is not speaking in metaphor?

What do you think of angels?

The preacher and scholar Tom Long names what so many of us feel when he writes, “*actually* believing in angels is quaint at best, and superstitious at worst¹. In our modern, scientific world, angels seem preposterous. They are from a different time when not as much was known about reality. In truth, as people of faith who live in the modern world, the presence of angels seems to equate our faith that we hold dear to the folly of fairy tales and bedtime stories. It is embarrassing.”

Tom Long goes on to point out that we have a lot to be embarrassed about! The Bible is chock full of angels. They flutter around on every page. They were in the garden of Eden guarding the tree of life; they were in the lion's den with Daniel keeping him safe; they were with the shepherds watching over their flocks to proclaim the birth of Jesus; they

¹ Long, Tom, “On Having Angels for Dinner,” 1992

were with Jesus on the mountaintop during his temptation; they were at the empty tomb when the women crept in, “he is not here,” the angel said, “he is risen!” And now, they are in the letter to the Hebrews, staring us in the face. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

As if the Bible wasn’t enough, listen to this screed against those of us who might doubt or dismiss the reality of angels by thinking of them in a metaphorical sense, “...[s]o many testimonies of Scripture cry out against this nonsense that it is a wonder such crass ignorance could be borne within [a] people.”² You might be familiar with the author of that statement, he was a man named John Calvin.

What do you think about angels?

The word “angel” in original language of both the Old and New Testaments means “messenger.” To believe in angels does not mean that we think there are heavenly beings in white tunics fluttering about. And yet, as Tom Long articulates, believing in angels “confronts our contemporary worldview and reality by asking us to believe that the world is more than we can see or touch—more than we can receive with our senses. It is a world that is infused with a mystery that is beyond human understanding, and this mystery who is God is attempting to speak to [us] through messengers.”³

Is that so hard to believe that God cares enough about you to send messengers—or angels—to communicate? Is it so hard to believe that we might not know all there is to know about the world around us and about God?

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I think about the encounters you have shared with me from your lives...
With the former student that you might describe as a “challenge,” if you wanted to be polite, who – years later – makes it a point to thank you for taking an interest in his life and making a difference. Could that have been a messenger of love and affirmation?

² Calvin, John, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.9

³ Long, Tom “On Having Angels for Dinner,” 1992

Or with a person who reminded you so much of the loved one you had lost – whose mannerisms, and voice, and looks made you forget your grief for only a moment. Could that have been a messenger of comfort?

Or with the person who you served at the Urban Ministry Center, whose story stuck with you because it could just have easily been your own; the person who made you rethink your old assumptions about why people become homeless. Could they have been a messenger of truth?

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

You see, practicing hospitality is not only something we do to be nice. We don't practice hospitality because it earns us a good reputation. We don't only practice hospitality toward people we know and who make us feel safe.

We practice hospitality – to strangers – because we never know when God is going to show up.

In our church I happen to think the place we best practice hospitality is around the table.

Just this past Sunday – in a joint effort between our evangelism committee and our youth group – our young people assembled new picnic tables for the front lawn so that more people in our neighborhood might find this campus a place of welcome and rest.

Every week on three different occasions people come to our church to receive food to fill their tables through our Loaves and Fishes program.

Starting in November – for three nights a week, around round tables with white linen tablecloths, we will host 12 people who find themselves homeless. Central to our ministry with Room in the Inn is treating the people we hosts as guests who are worthy of our respect.

On Wednesday nights in the spring and the fall we fill the tables in the Wood Fellowship Hall with people of different ages and races and backgrounds during the meal that precedes a constellation of

programs at Wednesday Connect. It is at those tables that life and faith are shared – through stories and struggles and bread that is broken.

In this room (and in the homes of those who cannot be present in this room) we gather around a table. On it are the simple elements of bread and wine – symbols of Christ’s gift to us in his life, death, and resurrection. This is a welcome table – where no one is turned away and where everyone is invited. And, believe me, when we make a point to be hospitable as we approach this table it matters – and lives are changed.

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I heard a story recently about tables from the preacher Fred Craddock. Fred – who is now retired – shared about a time he was invited to speak at a conference in Winnipeg, Canada. It was October, and in October the weather in Winnipeg is different than the weather in Georgia where Fred calls home. The heaviest article of clothing Fred packed for his trip was a windbreaker and on the morning he was to give his lecture there was a foot of snow on the ground. With the weather, the lecture was cancelled and so Fred started to make his way home – leaving from a bus station that had a restaurant attached to it. I’m going to continue the story in his words:

“I went outside, shivering. The wind was cold, the snow was deep. I slid and bumped and finally made it around the corner into the bus station. Every stranded traveler in western Canada was in there, strangers to each other and to me, pressing and pushing and loud. I finally found a place to sit, and after a while a man in a greasy apron came over and said, ‘what’ll you have?’ I said, ‘May I see a menu?’ He said, ‘what do you need a menu for? We have soup.’ I said, ‘what kinds of soup do you have?’ And he said, ‘soup. You want some soup?’ I said, ‘that was what I was going to order—soup.’ He brought the soup, and I put the spoon to it. It was the awfulest. It was kind of gray looking; it was so bad I couldn’t eat it, but I sat there and put my hands around it. It was warm, so I sat there with my head down...and stayed bent over my soup stove.

The door opened again. The wind was icy, and somebody yelled, ‘close the door!’ In came this woman clutching her little coat. She found a place not far from me. The greasy apron came, ‘what do you want?’ She

said, 'a glass of water.' He brought her a glass of water, took out his tablet, and said, 'now, what'll you have?' She said, 'just the water.' He said, 'you have to order, lady.' 'Well, I just want a glass of water.' 'Look,' he said, 'I have customers that pay—what do you think this is a church or something? Now what do you want?' She said, 'just a cup of water and a place to get warm.' 'Look, there are people that are paying here. If you're not going to order, you've got to leave!' So she got up to leave, and then, almost as if rehearsed, everybody in that little café stood up and started out the door. I got up and said, 'I'm voting for something; I don't know what it is.' And the man in the greasy apron said, 'alright, alright, alright, she can stay.' Everybody sat down, and he brought her a bowl of soup.

I said to the person sitting there by me, 'who is she?' He said, 'I have never seen her before.' The place grew quiet, but I heard the sipping of that awful soup and I said, 'I am going to try that again.' I put my spoon to the soup—and you know, it wasn't that bad. Everybody was eating the soup. I started eating the soup, and it was actually pretty good soup. I have no idea what kind of soup it was, but I do recall when I was eating it, it tasted a little bit like bread and wine. Just a little bit like bread and wine."⁴

What do you think about angels?

Can you possibly believe that the same one who reveals himself to us in the breaking of the bread; the same one who loves us so much he went to the cross; the same one who was raised from the grave cares enough to speak to us even now?

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

We may never know when we entertain the angels, but we can be sure that through our acts of hospitality we receive a message of grace from a God who transcends our understanding. And we can be sure that we will be transformed.

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⁴ Craddock, Fred, *Craddock Stories*, 83-84.