

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost- August 29, 2010

Scripture lessons: Genesis 18:1-8 & Hebrews 13:1-6

ENTERTAINING ANGELS

One day Abraham is sitting at his tent, the same tent he always travels in with his wife, Sarah. It's a hot day like so many others in their part of the world, when three strangers come along.

Who can know what their arrival will mean? They might be cattle thieves. They might be up to some other kind of mischief. Or they might be innocently on their way and in need of hospitality.

Abraham and Sarah assume the best of them. They provide water for their feet, a place to sit down, and a good meal of bread, curds, and beef.

After these wayfarers finish their dinner, they promise Abraham and Sarah that they'll have a child. The old couple hears this and laughs. How could this be since they're both over ninety?! Sure, God has promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, but how do two people nearing a hundred years old have a child? It must be a joke, but it's not. In due time, Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

I wonder how many other tents these strangers might have visited before finding welcome at Abraham and Sarah's. Maybe lots of other people had seen them only as dirty and dangerous. Maybe no one else saw them as angels who could bring good news from God.

The travelers didn't deliver their good news as a reward for Sarah and Abraham's hospitality. Yet Abraham and Sarah wouldn't have received it if they hadn't been willing to welcome strangers.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers," says the letter to the Hebrews, "for some thereby have entertained angels unawares." There are marvelous strangers who come to bless us as messengers of God, if only we'll receive them. Not only will we sometimes discover that we've entertained angels without knowing it. Sometimes we'll see that these angels entertain *us*.

It wasn't a hot day like Sarah's and Abraham's, but a cold day on the east coast of the United States in January, 2007. A young man in jeans and a T-shirt set up next to a trash basket in a subway station in Washington, D.C. It was 7:51 in the morning and the start of the D.C. rush hour. The young man opened his violin case and began to play.

Not many people took notice of him. They carried newspapers and briefcases, cell phones, iPods, and coffee cups. They hurried to buy magazines and lottery tickets from a nearby kiosk. Hardly anyone stopped to listen.

No one could have known that the instrument the young man was playing was a Stradivarius, crafted in 1713 when Antonio Stradivari was at the height of his powers. The last time this particular violin had been sold it fetched \$3.5 million.

The violinist's name was Joshua Bell. He's widely acclaimed as one of the greatest musicians of his generation. A ticket for his formal performances usually costs \$100 or more.

On this cold winter's day, he chose to play Bach's "Chaconne" from Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Like many other musicians, Joshua Bell considers it to be (and I quote) "not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect." It's one of the most difficult pieces a violinist can play.

Johannes Brahms, himself one of history's great composers, wrote this about Bach's Partita No. 2 in D minor:

"On one stave for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind."

Joshua Bell, a truly great musician, played this piece of music, one of the best ever written, on a cold January day in a Washington, D.C. subway and during the 43 minutes he played, 1097 people passed by him. Seven of them stopped. Some people stood three feet away and never looked at him.

Bell says it was strange to be almost completely ignored, but he was grateful when someone tossed him a dollar instead of coins. One bystander later admitted, “Yeah, I saw the violinist, but nothing about him struck me as much of anything.”

Another person said, though, “It was the most astonishing thing I’ve ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour and people weren’t stopping and not even looking and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! . . . I was thinking, “*Omigosh, what kind of city do I live in that this could happen?*”

For his 43 minutes of playing, Joshua Bell took in a grand total of \$32.17- some of it in pennies. A few weeks later, he received the Avery Fisher prize which is given each year to the classical musician judged to be the best in America. The prize carried with it a monetary award of \$75,000.

We don’t often treat each other as wonders. We seldom stop and pay serious attention to the music each of us is playing, whether literally or with our lives.

It’s easy to go along through all of our days, day after day and take little notice of what’s going on with each other, even with those who aren’t strangers to us. Even people we spend time with regularly, including our family members, can remain strangers to us. As Christians, this is a heavy temptation we must learn to resist. In one of the greatest sermons ever written, entitled “The Weight of Glory”, C.S. Lewis explains why. He says:

“It may be possible for each (of us) to think too much of (our) own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for (us) to think too often or too deeply about that of (our) neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it . . . It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person (we) talk to may one day be a creature which, if (we) saw it now, (we) would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as we now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities (and) it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. (We) have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations- these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit- immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously- no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love . . . (for) (n)ext to the Blessed Sacrament itself, our neighbor is the holiest object presented to our senses.”

Our life together in the church is meant to train our senses to perceive and act upon this astounding fact. Sunday after Sunday, we’re urged to practice taking in and responding to our neighbor’s glory. We’re prompted to open up, to be attentive to and welcoming of the whole raft of possible gods and goddesses that enter the church whenever we open our doors. We’re sent from here to open up, to be attentive to and welcoming of all those immortal, strange, and extraordinary neighbors who are out and about with us in God’s world every day. Like Abraham and Sarah we might have second thoughts about being hospitable towards them, but look what God brought through the strangers they received! What might God do with us through blessed strangers?

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unawares.” Some people, who may seem the strangest to us, may turn out to be messengers from God.

We take a look around at everyone with us in worship today. How well do we know each other? How open and attentive, welcoming and hospitable are we to each other? Do we see each other as those, who next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, are the holiest objects presented to our senses? Do we see each other as possible gods and goddesses? If we find it hard to recognize God’s image in those who are with us here, how much more difficult is it for us to see God in strangers day by day?

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unawares.”

Preacher Larry Wood tells this story from early in his ministry. The church he was serving had just received a new grand piano. A day or so after the church had taken delivery of it, one of the congregation's longtime members, a real estate agent, asked if it would be OK for a friend of his to come over and try out the new instrument. Wood said sure and a little later the two men arrived- the church member who was well-to-do and his friend whom Wood describes as "really scruffy". The man's hair was rumpled, his clothes were rumpled, and even his teeth appeared rumpled. Wood guessed he might have had the same clothes on for a week.

The member introduced his friend as Randy. Wood tried to welcome Randy to the church, but the stranger could hardly wait for the introductory pleasantries to be over so he could sit down to the piano. Once there, he rummaged in the keyboard as if he were looking for a fresh pair of socks- finding a melody here, a melody there, and moving from song to song. Most of the tunes were from before Wood's time, but he recognized a few, especially one from Hoagy Carmichael.

He asked, "That's *Stardust*, isn't it?" but Randy just kept playing the piece through several changes. His performance of it was so sure-footed, gentle, and personal that Wood remarked, "He plays it like he wrote it." The church member laughed and said, "Well, you're close. This is Hoagy Carmichael's son."

There are marvelous strangers who come to bless us and sometimes they entertain us, too. For either or both to happen, we must receive them. We need to be open and attentive, welcoming and hospitable.

Every time we gather here there are strangers among us, including some we've already spent lots of time with, who carry with them blessings we can only begin to imagine. The same is true every day as we live among the host of our fellow human beings whom God has made to be with us in God's great, wide world. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, all of them are the holiest objects ever presented to our senses.

So today we resolve again to show hospitality to strangers, knowing that thereby we may entertain angels unawares. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank You for Your hospitality to us. We thank You that all of us belong to You as Your children. Help us always to live that truth, seeing each other, whether we're strangers to or familiar with each other, as sisters and brothers, as potential angels, gods, and goddesses who can bring marvelous gifts from You.

In Your love, we pray for all who are Yours, whether they're stranger, friend, or enemy to us. We pray for them in whatever condition of need they're in. We pray for the persecuted and the oppressed, for those suffering from injustice or cruelty. We pray for the hungry and those seeking refuge. We pray for the guilt-ridden, the heart-broken, the depressed, and the lonely. We pray for those stricken with pain or illness. We pray for those who are dying and those who are in grief. Help us to be those through whom they will know Your comfort and healing. Draw all of us nearer to You until that day when in Your love all of creation will be healed and made new. We pray for this coming of Your kingdom in Jesus' name and we pray for it as he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.