

An Airbnb, Angels, Onions, and a Rabbi, Oh My!
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

When these texts have come up in the past, I've always preached on Jesus and the parable of the awkward dinner party. But this year, I can't get past the opening verses we have in the text from the letter to the Hebrews. The author says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." These words recall Abraham and Sarah's hosting of the three strangers, who turn out to be angels.

The older translation of the text is the one that I hear in my head - "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."¹ With these words swirling in the background all week - a few stories.

On Wednesday, the Sunday Funday teaching team met at Josie and Scott Ellis'. To visit, and eat together, and plan. Josie and Scott run an Airbnb out of their home - so while we were at the table, we could hear Scott welcoming the newest guest, and another came and went through the kitchen. Josie and Scott offer more than a room - they offer generosity of spirit, a warm welcome, and a safe place to land. In the process, on occasion they have found their own assumptions challenged, and their already considerable empathy expanded even further. You can see it reflected in their expressions when they tell stories about their experiences as hosts, and you can feel it in their energy - at times they are entertaining angels, and it has changed them.

Most recently, they had a guest stay for a night after being a victim of arson. When they got to know her, they realized that they could do more. Provide her with a sustainable place to stay while she gets back on her feet and finds her way. She's not their traditional guest, not from the same economic bracket, and a little rough around the edges. But she's also hard-working mom who's doing the best she can in an extraordinarily difficult situation. She now lives in their camper, and their lives are intertwined with hers. And all of them are better for this relationship.²

Ken and I had somewhat similar experience when we moved here from Maine in the middle of winter (during COVID). The apartment in our new house still had renters living there. We never planned (or wanted) to be landlords, and given the times, having other people in the same house seemed like a very poor choice. But we didn't want to ask this young man and his daughter to move out just because the property had changed hands.

It was uncomfortable for us; we'd been isolating for a year - and now we were sharing space with strangers. Yes, they had their own living quarters, and a relatively separate entrance, but they also had a door that opened right into the upstairs hallway of our living space. It felt weirdly intimate, and incredibly odd.

But allowing them to stay was clearly the right thing to do. And we slowly got used to it. The sounds of people moving overhead when we were all together downstairs. Paying attention to the sound of the bath running upstairs, knowing there'd be no hot water downstairs for a little bit. The rhythms of living near one another. They became neighbors - not strangers anymore.

And we learned a lot from Josh - a three-tour purple heart veteran, on permanent disability from injuries sustained in Iraq. This young man returned home to become the custodial parent for his daughter, who was so young when they moved into the apartment that she was drawing stick-figure people. (There's still one or two in evidence on a built-in bookshelf - that I won't let anyone paint over!) Eventually Josh and Alivia moved out - when he recognized that his aunt's MS was getting worse. And they moved to North Adams to live with her, and make sure that she's safe.

There's so much to learn when we let others into our lives, when we meet people with openness, when we're willing to be vulnerable to, and with, one another. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained **angels** unawares."³

The hospitality we're being encouraged to show isn't necessarily hosting someone in our home, or even at our tables (though sometimes that's what hospitality looks like). The hospitality the author means is that of mutual love. We're being urged to make room for another, to allow others shape us, to change our understanding, to broaden our perspective, to break our hearts open a little more. And we can do that in any moment when we're willing to be vulnerable to another.

It can be awkward and even terrifying. Just as it can be holy. Though we need to be smart. There's a reason we have certain biases and preconceptions. Some are way off base and need to be challenged. And some are legitimate concerns, and we need to pay attention to those.

In addition, we're all wired a little differently. We have different connections and communities in which to show hospitality. So, a step out of your comfort zone may look very different than mine and Ken's, or Josie and Scott's. But the opportunities are out there, constantly.

Another story:

Ken and I went to the Farmer's market a week ago, and walking across the parking lot we noticed an elderly man holding a reusable shopping bag. I just figured he was waiting for his ride, but Ken went over and asked if he needed any help. Turns out he was slowly shuffling his way toward the market. So, Ken gave him an arm and we helped him cross the street, where Anthony bought a lot of onions. After doing our own shopping, we helped him back across the street and learned that Anthony moved to Pittsfield from Ghana in 2005, and worked until he suffered a stroke. He likes onions and was using these for a stew. A lovely man - Ken wanted to adopt him.

Some interactions are just business as usual, but then there are those moments like this one. When we suspect the Spirit is moving in and through this exchange - and we are learning something we need to know, we're growing, and becoming the people God would have us be.

Last story:

I made a hospital visit this week, to see a woman I didn't know, who's not connected to this parish. But her daughter in the Boston area has befriended my daughter in the Boston area, and through that act of friendship, we're connected, however loosely.

And when Naomi's mother fell and was hospitalized at BMC, my daughter connected me with Naomi and her parents, who summer in Stockbridge. (And as they told me, have since before I was born!) I visited with Naomi's mother for a few minutes, and then let her sleep. After which I spent an hour with Naomi's 90-year-old father, who is a retired rabbi. We had a remarkable conversation about life in ministry. It was an incredible gift; one I never saw coming.

Friends, as we move into the last days of summer, our text encourages us to engage the world fully, open ourselves to learn from those around us, and interact with our hearts wide open. Because you never know who we'll meet and how we'll grow.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."⁴

¹ Hebrews 13:2, Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

² Note - permission given by Josie and by her guest to share this story.

³ Hebrews 13:2, Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

⁴ Hebrews 13:2, Revised Standard Version of the Bible.