

Hospitality and Welcome (Luke 14; Hebrews 13)

Introduction.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," says our epistle today. And Jesus says, **"when you entertain, here's who you should invite...."** This theme--hospitality and welcome--are very relevant.

At this time of year, when we take kids to college, send our kids to new schools or move ourselves, we realize that these borders between here and there, elementary and junior high, high school and college, old neighborhood, new neighborhood--these are absolutely key moments. And that it is the insiders, those who are already there, who are the ones who are responsible for welcoming others. Later this month some old friends of Bette's are moving into our neighborhood--we are putting on of gathering to welcome them and introduce them to the neighbors. Think what it would be like if all the freshman students were homesick! The same is true of our welcoming people into the church....if we don't welcome people, why should visitors stay, we as a church will fail to grow, which means we will shrink. We have two great opportunities to be hospitable and welcome folks to Christ Church. Next Saturday is our Fall Festival. We can all invite friends, neighbors and family members to come with us. On September 15th we are having an Alpha Celebration dinner here at the church--what about inviting someone you know to attend with you that evening--this is a prime way to introduce folks to Christ Church.

But there's something far deeper about hospitality and welcome, something that the writers of our two passages are recognizing here.

I'd like you to think of a time when you experienced real hospitality, when you felt deeply welcomed somewhere. Darmstadt. Arriving at a farm in the Karoo

Now if you think about my experience and I would guess yours, there are several things you'll notice. Notice how little it has to do with **"the hospitality industry."** --arriving at a ritzy hotel. May be one of the great principles of hospitality is to make people feel at home and that involves putting people at their ease--Priscilla Bromley.

Hospitality and welcome are deep and profound and have little to do with surface appearances. We see this not only in our passages for today, but throughout the scriptures. One of the main things that incurs God's wrath in the Old Testament is the people of Israel's lack of openness to the strangers and refugees in their midst.....over and over God says, remember, you were once a stranger and pilgrim....you know what it's like to be the outsider.....

And it's not just in scripture: one of the most common themes in folk tales and myths is that of hospitality and welcome. Those who welcome the one who appears to be poor, disreputable, and a nobody, finds that they've entertained royalty or maybe one of the gods. Woe betide those who mistreat these guests. Slam the door in someone's face, be mean to them and, you're asking for trouble, declare the old stories. Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty recount hospitality gone wrong.

You can't judge, remember, by clothes. This foundling, this orphan, this alien probably has blue blood. Relegate her to the cinders or try to kill her, lord it over her because of your greater wealth, better connections--and you'll be in trouble. The stranger acts as a prophet, showing the true mettle of hosts by their welcome of guests. In Dante's Inferno, bad hosts find their eternal torture near hell's bottom.

Notice that the onus in hospitality is on the host, not the guest. The ones who are at the bottom of Dante's hell are there because they have taken advantage of their power as hosts, taking advantage of the stranger in their midst.

Why would this be such a consistent theme in scripture, such a recurrent motif in folk tales and literature? Why do we need to pay such careful attention to this area, in our individual lives and in our life as a church?

1. It seems clear that guest/ the outsider is vulnerable, which is why in the old traditions it is the host who carries responsibility for misuses of hospitality. I know how vulnerable I felt half dead pulling in to that farm in the Karoo, or at that dinner party and I spoke the language and have functioned in a number of cultures, etc. Those who are on the outside in our neighborhoods, who are new to our schools, who come to visit the church are vulnerable. We are called to do all in our power to create a safe and welcoming place for them.

In our gospel, Jesus emphasizes that we should invite those who could never pay us back, we should be looking for those who don't have a home to invite us into, those who are on their own, those who are poor etc. Messiah-so many single people for whom Holidays are tough MN can be a hard place to break into...how could we welcome transplants to MN? Look for the outsiders? As Christians, we should never have a holiday meal without having made a real attempt to invite an outsider or stranger, someone who' has no family here.

2. We welcome the stranger because in the old traditions, the stranger, invited into our midst will bring something, perhaps even turning out to be an angel unawares. The stranger/outsider may bring a perspective that we are unable as insiders to have. Joan Chittister writes ***that "Benedictine spirituality says that we must continue to let the stranger come into our lives because in the stranger may come the only honest insight we can get in our plastic***

worlds. The abbot is instructed to listen to the criticism of the stranger because, the Rule teaches the community, "God may have sent that one for that very reason." In many monasteries, the abbot would personally greet the stranger/ the beggar at the gate, bring them in, and then listen, assuming that this person was bringing a word from God.

Many of us have experienced this with the people we've invited into our homes, feeling quite generous for doing it, and realizing that they have given us new perspectives by being there. Jodi

3. But finally we welcome them, because hospitality is at the heart of God. The scriptures are basically the story of God's seeking, God's welcome. Jesus' ministry was one of hospitality, of eating and drinking with outsiders, of welcoming those who felt themselves to be on the outside. God has welcomed us, no matter how strange we are, and so we offer that hospitality to others.

And that's really what our epistle and gospel for today tell us. Notice in our Hebrews passage: lots about empathy with the prisoner, with those who are tortured. In this passage it is clear why we can practice hospitality, and it is in verse 5, "Let your lives be free from love of money and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid What can anyone do to me?" The security and the abundance of God, the hospitality at the heart of God makes us able to be hospitable in turn. Similarly in the gospel, when Jesus tells us who to invite--those who cannot return our hospitality, he points out that it is at the resurrection that we will be paid back.

Over these next few weeks, we will meet new people in our neighborhoods, our kids schools, the workplace. Over the next few weeks new people will be showing up at Christ Church, at services, in adult ed, with their children, at Alpha. How can we in our welcome, make them feel safe, listen to what they may have to bring us? How can we extend to them the hospitality that God has extended to us?