

## Proper 6, Pentecost IV June 15, 2008

Here are a couple of short stories that lead into what I want to talk about this morning. First, several of you have already heard the story of Kathleen and my return from Minnesota last Monday. All went well until Dallas, where we ran into a cascade of flight changes, gate changes, time changes, flight cancellations and the absence of rental cars that were allowed to go to Midland. Long day. Finally, when all else had failed, we called one of my sisters and her family who live in Dallas. They picked us up, gave us a place to stay, and took us to a different airport and a different airline the next morning. A happy ending—and this was because of the gift of hospitality, of welcoming. Kathleen and I were very appreciative, but not surprised. Hospitality is one of the things that families do; it's part of what it means to be a family. Hospitality can offer safety and comfort when things get difficult, or fall apart.

The second story is that, when Angela Hock was here a couple of weeks ago, she began by reminding us of the areas of ministry that the long and careful mission statement process had raised as central to who we want to be as Saint Nicholas' Church. These were outreach, worship, and hospitality. So, one of the three goals we came up with has to do with hospitality, especially welcoming newcomers—and we'll be hearing more and more about that in the months ahead.

And I am just tickled pink that we treated hospitality as a ministry goal, a sort of moral imperative about who we want to be. You see, the term hospitality has come to mean mostly things like having friends over for a pleasant meal, or of the 'hospitality industry' of hotels and restaurants—which are always open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards. This makes it real easy for us to lose the deeper and much more ancient moral dimensions of hospitality, and the amazingly rich tradition of Biblical hospitality, where it is understood as fundamental to faithful living.

We get a better grasp of this from a couple of today's reading, especially the one from Genesis, which continues the story of Abraham we began last week, and will be hearing for some time. Abraham's dates place him almost 4,000 years ago, in the bronze age. This was a time when who you were, where you belonged, what your identity was, and where you were safe, indeed where you were really a person, all of this had to do with your clan, your family. Without those, you were not really there, you didn't really exist; and you were not safe.

But what if you were somewhere else? What if you were outside of that family unit, and alone? What if you lost your clan or lost your way? What then?

It was out of this predicament, one that everyone knew was a haunting possibility, that the sacred duty of hospitality developed. Hospitality meant that strangers, no matter who they were, no matter how dangerous they may be, no matter what group they belonged to, *strangers were entertained as guests*. They were provided with what they needed, and they were assured of safety. This moral duty was often more stringently adhered to than were the few written laws that existed.

That's what's going on with Abraham and his three unexpected guests. If you follow the whole Abraham story in Genesis, you know that Abraham was not, by nature, a particularly honest or decent fellow—and you also know that he had circumcised himself just a couple of days before this story happened. So his kindness to the three strangers cannot be credited either to his feeling generous (postoperatively, and in the heat of the day) or, for that matter, to his *being* particularly good. Besides, although *we* know from the beginning that it was the Lord who appeared to Abraham, there is no hint in the story that Abraham knew it.

Instead, out of a moral code already ancient, Abraham offered hospitality because that is what one did; because the alternative was a world so consumed by isolation and violence that it was inconceivable. Hospitality, receiving the stranger as a guest, was, even 4,000 years ago, the base line of what it meant to be human. And it was through Abraham's openness to the strangers that God's promises to Abraham (and to us) moved an important step forward.

The importance of hospitality has always been a key part of both the Jewish and the Christian stories. For the people of ancient Israel, understanding themselves as strangers and sojourners with responsibility to care for vulnerable strangers, was part of what it meant to be the people of God. In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews could have had Abraham in mind when he said "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares;" and several early Christian writers claimed that transcending ethnic and social differences by sharing meals, homes and worship with people of different backgrounds was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith.

Even today, in an uncaring world where so many people receive only rebuke and rejection, our little, unspectacular acts of kindness and open generosity can make all the difference; and just may be the only sign of the love of Christ that some one experiences that day, that week or ever.

So, it is a very good thing to have this ancient biblical norm among our ministry goals, and we need to name and to celebrate this vibrant ministry among us. While we can always do better, we *do* place real importance on welcoming people, both those we know and those we don't know.

We honour each others' needs in times of crisis and pain; we share one another's journey through thick and thin. But hospitality goes much further than this; and I want to point at just two of the deeper implications of the ministry of hospitality.

The first is suggested in both the Abraham story and the Gospel, (and really has its roots in the earliest mythologies of the area.) It is simply that you never know who it is that comes to the door. In Abraham's case, it was the Lord himself, while Jesus suggests that those who refuse to welcome the disciples when *they* come as strangers have closed themselves off to the Good News that Jesus offers. And, in a much more mundane way, since I have been 'discovered' by some of the homeless and transient populations of Midland, I frequently need to remind myself of Mother Theresa's description of the people she served—she called them “Jesus in very disquieting disguise”. We do need to remember that, in a rich variety of ways, the stranger at the door can actually be the presence of God, or can bring the presence of God. Often, to discover where God is especially for us, it helps tremendously to be open to strangers, and to be willing to allow outsiders to enter our family circle by transforming them from strangers to guests.

The second has to do with room. To receive the stranger, the other, willingly and openly, to do that we need to have room for that other—not just or primarily room in our building, but mostly room within ourselves. If we are full, if all of our interior space is taken up with our own preconceptions, certainties, criteria, fears, defenses, prejudices, stuff, or convictions about how things ought to be, well, then, we will have no room for the other—and regardless of what we may say or even wish—real hospitality, which involves the promise of both acceptance and safety, will simply not be possible.

Som hospitality is a big deal; and the real point of hospitality is not being nice—to each other or to the stranger—and it is not about growing the church, or financing the church, or helping the church.

The real point of hospitality is being the Church—it is giving freely what has been freely given to us. And we will, I promise you, entertain angles unawares.