

***Hospitality, Part 1: On Welcoming Strangers and Angels***  
**Sermon on Luke 14:1-6, 12-14 and Hebrews 13:1-13 (9/12 & 9/13/15)**  
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My parents are both teachers and so, when my sister and I were growing-up, our little family of four spent the bulk of every summer taking driving vacations all over the country to visit family and to play American tourists. We took lots and lots of these trips...and, on these trips, we took lots and lots of pictures.

It was a fairly common thing for my mom or dad to ask some random stranger to take a picture of our family posed in front of some national treasure. Then, of course, my parents would always reciprocate by asking our random photographer if they would like one of them to take their picture. Most of the time, the strangers were grateful for the offer.

When I was a kid, this always kind of embarrassed me – my parents asking random strangers to do a favor for us, or my parents *offering* to do a favor for random strangers. As a kid...embarrassing. Now, in adulthood, when out playing tourist, both my sister and I absolutely *love* doing just this very thing.

In fact, when I visited my sister and brother-in-law in Bozeman, Montana, this summer, my sister and I had the opportunity to do this in a really fun way. She and I had gone hiking at a popular Bozeman locale one morning and, when we reached the summit of the hike, there was a group of about 25 people who appeared to be having a really great time together.

As we approached them, my sister and I offered friendly greetings. They were all smiley and chatty and made some joke about welcoming *us* to their family reunion.

We soon learned it was a bride and groom with their wedding party and close family members. They had all decided to do this popular Bozeman hike as a way to get their day started before the rest of their wedding festivities commenced.

When we saw them starting to assemble for a group photo, and noticed that one guy in their group was separating from the crowd, camera in hand, to take the picture, my sister and I stepped in to make the ask: “Would you like one of us to take the picture? Then you can all be in it!”

They were thrilled and so were we. They had extended us a measure of hospitality by welcoming us into the joy of their time together...and we got to reciprocate with a small measure of our own, photographic hospitality.

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In this day and age of selfies, this kind of small hospitality is harder to experience – especially now with the advent of the selfie stick.

I don't happen to have ever actually seen one, but I know a selfie stick is some sort of telescoping arm contraption that allows you to hold your phone out much farther than you can hold it yourself – so you're able to get a bigger, more scenic shot.

Frankly, when I think about selfie sticks, I think, “Why don't you just ask someone to take your picture for you?” Except for very remote areas with few tourists, you'll be able to find *someone* to ask. And, you'll likely be able to find a willing person.

But I think we often fear asking strangers to do something like this for us...and we often fear *offering* to do something like this for strangers. It can be a little risky, right? *What if they steal my phone or my camera? What if they think I'm going to steal theirs?*

I must admit, as much as I love picture-taking hospitality with strangers, it occurs to me nearly every time that I could lose my phone...or those whose picture I'm offering to take might think *I'm* some dishonest weirdo who's going to take off with their stuff. It *is* a little risky. There's no way around that. But, when it comes to true hospitality, there is always some measure of *risk*.

Think about the way many of us feel when people we don't know well come over to our house: I don't know about you all, but I can get quite concerned about being judged. *Will they notice the dust or the dirty windows? Can they look past the piles of mail and the cluttered countertops? Oh, shoot – did I empty the garbage in the bathroom???*

So often we think about *hospitality* only in terms of how things *look* – but it's about so much more than that. How things *look*, and how clean things are, can certainly be an important part of hospitality. I would argue, however, that true hospitality is, ultimately, less about how things *look*, and more about how things feel.

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Early this summer here at McCabe, we began a year-long sermon- and worship-related focus on *generosity*. Somehow, in some way, most every worship service through the end of May will center around an aspect of generosity.

We believe in and we worship a God whose very heart and mind are defined by generosity...a God who gives us the gifts of life, love, laughter, challenge, and hope... a God who gave us Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Lord.

Those of us who choose to follow Jesus and to claim him as our Lord and Savior, well, we are called to be defined by the same things that defined him...and, as the Son of our living God, choosing to follow Jesus means choosing to be defined by *generosity*.

To be generous is to be a *giver*. It's to have a generous spirit in the way we think about and talk to others. To be generous is to give away a portion of our resources: a portion of our time, talent, energy, and money.

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Being around generous people feels like a gift in and of itself. Generous people make you feel important – they make you feel worthy and valued.

Generous people make you feel *welcome*. When you're with generous people, you simply feel like you belong there – wherever you happen to be. So, in many ways, *hospitality* is generosity in action.

And, especially because we're calling this weekend at McCabe “Homecoming Weekend” – as many of our ministry programs get officially kicked-off this week – it makes sense for us to take some time to consider *hospitality*. So that's what we're going to do this weekend and next in worship.

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Now, in church, we often think of *hospitality* as posting official greeters near the main entrances to the building, or we think of it as the simple smile or “hello” we give to a new person sitting near us in worship. And those are important, hospitable things to do – of course they are. Yet, there is far more to *hospitality* than friendly smiles and “hello”s. //

I recently came across several hospitality-related quotes when I was doing a little research online and my favorite was this one: “Hospitality is when someone feels at home in your presence.” *“Hospitality is when someone feels at home in your presence.”*

I have a sneaking suspicion that's how most people felt when they were around Jesus. They felt like they were important...like they belonged... like they were worthy and valuable...like they were just where they were supposed to be. At home.

In today's reading from Luke chapter 14, Jesus extended a hospitality challenge to someone who had invited him over for a dinner party.

The person who had invited Jesus over was a religious type – a religious leader, in fact. And, the way the writer Luke tells the story, you get the impression that all those present at this dinner party were “important” people: other religious leaders and folks with high status in the community...folks who probably liked to know they were always on the guest list for certain types of parties. The “in” religious crowd, if you will.

But what did Jesus say to them? Well, he certainly did not affirm any sort of snobby, high-minded attitude. Instead, Jesus said this:

“When you give a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. *They cannot pay you back. But God will bless you and reward you...*”

Our verses from Hebrews chapter 13 are similar in theme: “Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.” //

Uff-da. These words of Scripture offer quite the hospitality challenge, don't they?  
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In my relatively brief time here in Bismarck, I have heard over and over again about how “Bismarck is *changing* – it's just not the same as it used to be.” And when I hear this kind of thing, it's not usually a reference to *positive* changes in the community – like growth in the fine arts, more options for entertainment and shopping, or new opportunities to expand our horizons and get to know different kinds of people.

When I hear about how this community is “changing,” it's usually in reference to people feeling less safe...people choosing to lock their doors when they never used to...people being more aware of an increase in crime or in poverty.

Change often inspires negativity and fear – no matter what kind of change we're talking about. Yet, however you feel about our changing community, the words of the Bible still stand as a hospitality challenge for each and every one of us.

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*“When you give a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They cannot pay you back. But God will bless you and reward you...”*

*“Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.”*

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In April of 2002, seven months after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, my dad went to a work-related conference in New York City. My mom and I joined him and we were all able to do a bit of touring around Manhattan together.

We spent some time walking around the Financial District in Lower Manhattan, so we were able to see Ground Zero. At that time, there were still many personal memorials set up near the sidewalks in the neighborhood...and those personal memorials went on for blocks

There were photos of people who had died in the attacks...messages of love from those close to them...and many, many notes and gifts from people all over the world. In fact, I've never seen more origami paper peace cranes than I saw when my parents and I walked around Ground Zero that April of 2002.

There were hundreds and hundreds of peace crane strings looped around the memorials and they had been sent to New York from people of all ages – our global neighbors who were doing what they could to extend a little sympathy to our shocked, grieving nation.

Because thousands of lives had been stolen on 9/11, the memorials seemed to go on and on and on. It was really quite emotionally overwhelming to see – and rightly so. But, while we were near Ground Zero, the thing that made the strongest impression on me was not the blocks of memorials and it was not the massive piles of rubble being excavated where the Twin Towers had so recently stood tall and proud.

What made the strongest impression on me was a billboard we saw affixed to a building a couple blocks from the World Trade Center.

The sign was over 40 feet high and, depicted on it was a set of hands, clasped in prayer. In the middle of the picture were the words, “Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.” That alone was such a powerful message for that time and in that place. I mean, do you remember how *afraid* we all seemed to be in the months immediately following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks?

*“Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.”*

Those words alone on that billboard were balm to my soul, but what took my breath away was what we saw at the bottom of the billboard... because, at the bottom of the billboard – below the large praying hands – were the words “The People of The United Methodist Church,” along with the familiar Cross and Flame symbol.

The billboard had been placed by the United Methodist News Service in November of 2001. It was a prayerful reminder of God's gracious and merciful presence – kind of like a love letter – to the people of New York City from all of us who are part of The United Methodist Church.

It's possible I was never more proud to be United Methodist than when I saw that billboard near Ground Zero back in the spring of 2002. *“Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.”*

We so desperately needed that holy reminder 14 years ago...but we still desperately need it today. Because, unfortunately, our level of societal fear doesn't seem to have diminished since then.

In fact, in many ways, it often seems to me like we are *more* fearful than we've ever been.

And, in our lives and world, if there is one single thing serving as a barrier to true hospitality, it's *fear* – fear of other people...fear of the things that divide us...fear of the differences between us.

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The other day, I asked my Facebook friends to share with me experiences they've had of unexpected hospitality.

One of our McCabe members who is blessed with a very petite stature, shared this: “Since I am under tall, people are so kind to help me reach groceries from the top shelf in a store even when I don't ask. Like today, I was trying to get a twelve pack of [pop] off of a stack and some nice gentleman came over and asked, 'Can I help you with that?' [I was so] thankful for his help.”

Another of our McCabe members shared a tidbit that speaks powerfully, not only to today's Scripture readings, but also to our current reality as citizens of this nation and world. This member is originally from Alaska and he wrote this:

“In Alaska, it gets pretty cold, as one can imagine. Breaking down on the side of the road? It's a matter of life and death in the wintertime. I think that's a big part of why if you break down on the side of the road in Alaska, somebody WILL stop and help you.

“He or she won't care if you're black or white or Alaska Native. She or he won't care if you're Christian or atheist or [Jewish]. He or she won't care if you're Democrat or Republican or non-partisan. Because the one constant is that everybody needs a warm place out of the cold. And when government help can be dozens, or even hundreds, of miles away, hospitality becomes even more crucial.”

*“He or she won't care if you're black or white or Alaska Native. She or he won't care if you're Christian or atheist or [Jewish]. He or she won't care if you're Democrat or Republican or non-partisan.”*

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And Jesus said, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. *They* cannot pay you back. But God will bless you and reward you...”

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“[And be] sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.”

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*“Hospitality is when someone feels at home in your presence.”*

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Friends, the heart of Christian hospitality is moving beyond *fear* to help others feel at home in your presence. And, frankly, “home” is wherever you happen to be – in your house, at church, at the store, or out on the road.

“Hospitality is when someone feels at home in your presence.”

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The good news for all of us here today is that our God is eternally hospitable to us. As God's children, we are given the gifts of *value, importance, love, acceptance*. God welcomes us and we, in turn, are called to welcome others...to show true hospitality.

So do something today to help someone else feel at home in your presence. In doing so, you just may find you're welcoming an angel. Amen.