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 Arlington Street Church
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Angels Unawares

Most of us are afraid of strangers. We were taught not to talk with them. We teach our children to be afraid. We forget that our survival may depend on them: Would we recognize the farmers who harvested our breakfast ... or almost every meal we've ever eaten? How about the people who made your winter coat? In this country, "We entertain family and friends, rather than opening our homes to strangers.... We tend to see receiving guests as part of creating relationships.... Our care for strangers tends to be monetary rather than personal."¹ Our view of hospitality is less Good Samaritan and more Martha Stewart.

It was not always like this, and it does not have to be like this, now.

Miriam Schulman and Amal Barkouki-Winter are traveling in the Middle East. They write, "There is not one variety of olives on the table, but three, and hummus and eggplant, some pita, pickles, and white cheese.... Everywhere [here], the traveler is overwhelmed by hospitality.

"The virtue seems an ineluctable product of the landscape. Even as we traverse it in our air-conditioned car with ... liters of water at our side, we are stunned by the heat, the distances between towns.... To refuse a [person] refreshment in such a place is ... to threaten the openhandedness nomadic peoples must depend on to survive.... [It] is to let [them] die....

"No wonder, then, [that] the landscape that gave birth to the three great monotheistic religions produced in their adherents so great an emphasis on the virtue of hospitality. [In the Tanakh – the Hebrew scriptures; in the Christian Bible; and in the Qur'an,] the mistreatment of strangers is a sure way to incur divine wrath.

¹ Miriam Schulman and Amal Barkouki-Winter, "The Extra Mile," *Issues in Ethics*, Vol. II, No. 1, Winter 2000

One of my favorite passages in these holy books says, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”² The idea that, at any moment, we might be entertaining angels – and the word “angels” also translates as “messengers of G*d” – that should inspire us!

I’m sure many of you have heard conservative Christian commentators twist the story of Sodom to fixate on that which became the word “sodomy,” but in Judaism and Islam, and among scholars and enlightened Christians, the sin of Sodom was inhospitality. In all three faiths’ holy texts, the behavior of Abraham, or Ibrahim in the Qur’an, is contrasted with that of the Sodomites. Standing in the door of his tent, Abraham sees strangers approaching, rushes to greet his visitors, and prepares a feast for them. Lucky Abraham: The guests turn out to be angels, bringing the news that his wife, Sarah, will bear him a son. Later, in Sodom, Lot, or Lut, also welcomes these strangers and urges them to stay in his home. But the fatally unwise hooligans of Sodom riot outside Lot’s home, demanding that the visitors be delivered into their hands so they might rape them. Lot’s hospitality protects him from the wrath of G*d, which rains down on Sodom in the form of stones from the sky.

To welcome strangers is to welcome G*d. Some Christians believe that one of the angels was actually a “pre-incarnate” Jesus. In the book of Matthew, Jesus says, “For I was [hungry], and ye gave me meat. I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink. I was a stranger, and ye took me in. Naked, and ye clothed me. I was sick, and ye visited me. I was in prison, and ye came unto me.... Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these, ... ye have done it unto me.” I think of Mother Teresa speaking of “Christ, in all his distressing disguises.”

In sixth century Italy, with the Roman Empire in decline and society falling apart, Benedict of Nursia wrote a Rule of Life for “serfs, scholars, shepherds, and wealthy scions of nobility – a motley [crew] of would-be monastics.”³ The heart of Benedict’s Rule says, “Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ.” After Benedict’s death, barbarian hordes overran Europe, and the very idea of Western Civilization was imperiled. Tending

² Hebrews 13:2

³ Sister Jane Michele McClure, OSB, in “Crossings,” the tri-annual publication of the Sisters of Saint Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana

the fires of hospitality and the possibility that Christ is at the door, Benedictine monasteries are credited with the preservation of Western culture. Benedict was named the patron saint of Europe.⁴

(The joke in modern day Benedictine monasteries is that when they see yet another new person coming up the driveway, they say, “O, Christ, not you again!”)

The Statue of Liberty notwithstanding, hospitality is counter-cultural in this country. Viewed from a distance, America is the land of opportunity; up close, new immigrants, having undergone “extreme vetting,” are viewed with suspicion, at best, by those who came before them.

We can do better than this. We are counter-cultural. Hospitality is at the heart of our faith. We aspire to a prophetic welcome from sidewalk to vestibule, from pews to pulpit to parish hall, and we can and should and must walk out of here and live that prophetic welcome every single day. Imagine walking through the world and encountering every single person as if they were an angel sent to promote you through this Soul School we call life. We don’t have to believe this is true; we only have to act as if it’s true, and the world will be better for it ... and we will be much better for it.

Over the last several weeks, I started paying attention to stories of hospitality to strangers. I didn’t go out of my way; I just watched and listened. I stockpiled news of seven random but very deliberate acts of kindness, to remind us of what’s possible, and to give us good ideas! The first few are about throwing even a little bit of money at a challenging situation to make a huge difference. The rest are about taking a leap of faith and throwing ourselves at it.

Jerina Edwards of Oklahoma is bald from treatments for breast cancer. She posted on her Facebook page that a year ago at Christmas time, she and her family were eating at a Chinese restaurant when they learned that their meal had been paid for. The donor, who remained anonymous, explained that they knew something about what she was going through, and wanted to give Jerina and her family an early Christmas present. Jerina Edwards wrote, “More than anything, having cancer has shown me that

⁴ Please see e-benedictine.com/abouttherule/

there are a lot of good people in this world.... Whoever you are, thank you.”⁵

In Canberra, Australia, a woman had been holed up in the hospital for days with her nine-week-old son. When he was discharged, she found a parking ticket on her windshield. Opening the envelope, she found a note from a woman named Laura. “I saw your car had a parking ticket on it. I’m sure whatever you were going through at hospital is tough enough, so I have paid for you.... Hope things get better!”⁶

Leslie Wagner of Peel, Arkansas, found herself twelve dollars short when it came time to check out in the grocery store. She began pulling things out of her pile when the man behind her handed her a twenty. When she resisted, he said, “My mother is in the hospital.... I visit her every day and bring her flowers. I went this morning, and she got mad at me for spending ... money on more flowers. She demanded that I do something else with [my] money. So here, please accept this. [It’s] my mother’s flowers.”

An anonymous, young bartender in Birmingham, England dresses up as Spider-Man and takes to the streets after his shift. This got my attention ... and that’s exactly what he wants. He brings sandwiches to people living outside. “I’ve learned that everyone is the same,” he says. “I ... believe that we need to look at everyone ... the same as we would a close friend.” Who doesn’t want a turn at being a superhero? We can all try this!⁷

Marilyn Attebery of Spokane Valley, Washington writes that, as she was driving home in a blizzard, she noticed a vehicle trailing her. Suddenly, her tire blew. She pulled off the road, as did the driver behind her. A man jumped out from behind the wheel and changed her flat. “I was going to get off two miles back,” he said. “But I didn’t think that tire looked good.”

A young guy is sitting on the T, dressed in a suit but struggling with his tie. An elderly woman, dressed in a smart red coat, asks him, “Do you know how to tie it properly?” “No, ma’am,” he says. She taps her husband. “Come ... teach this young man how to tie his tie,” she says. He comes without hesitation and, as the train roars along, gives the young man a step-

⁵ [facebook.com/jerina.edwards](https://www.facebook.com/jerina.edwards)

⁶ [facebook.com/CanberraMums](https://www.facebook.com/CanberraMums)

⁷ huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/11/birmingham-spiderman-feeds-homeless_n_6831648.html

by-step tutorial. He watches closely as his student repeats the steps until he's sure he has it.⁸

And finally, from Dr. Mohammed Basha of Gainesville, Florida: “As I walked through the parking lot,” he writes, “all I could think of was the dire diagnosis I had just handed my [last] patient, Jimmy. Just then, I noticed an elderly gentleman handing tools to someone working under his stalled car. [It] was Jimmy. ‘Jimmy, what are you doing?’ Jimmy [slid out,] dusted off his pants ... [and waved] at the old man to start the car. ‘My cancer didn’t tell me not to help others, Doc.’ ... The engine roared to life.”

Let’s look into the mirror of these stories. Can you see yourself?

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The LGBT Asylum Task Force is doing the good work of welcoming the stranger and walking them through the maze of making a home in this strange land. They are doing great things; we will honor that work in our offering today. We, too, can welcome the stranger. We, too are called to do great things, and “small things with great love.”

Beloved spiritual companions,

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers:
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Imagine walking through the world
and encountering every single person
as if they were a messenger,
sent to promote you
through this Soul School we call life –
as if they were an angel.

May we do small things
with great love.
May we do great things.

Who’s your favorite superhero?

Amen!

⁸ Redd Desmond Thomas on Facebook