



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

August 29, 2010

Hospitality

What a joy to finally be with you this morning! It's taken quite a journey to get here, in more ways than one. Not just a journey of nearly 5000 miles, across this land of wonder and diversity, but also of years and experiences. Doubtless the journey started well before I ever realized it, but I do know when I became conscious of it, and it started eighteen years ago. Some of you have heard the story of the tornado that began my path to ordination, and because I intend to get a lot of sermon mileage out of that story, I will share only the part that has to do with this morning's scripture.

In preparation for the clean up after a freak November tornado stomped through the Indianapolis neighborhood in which St. Alban's Episcopal Church sat, several of us were canvassing the neighborhood with a dual purpose—to assess the many different needs within the neighborhood and to invite people to Sunday worship, to give thanks that only walls and roofs had been lost. This was not familiar territory for us Episcopalians, as you might imagine. You may have heard the joke that if you cross an Episcopalian with a Jehovah's Witness, you will get someone who will knock on your door but won't know what to say. I had already knocked on several doors, without finding anyone at home when I met my big challenge. As soon as I knocked, I heard someone coming to the door. He was a very large black man, who peered suspiciously at the insecure, somewhat nervous, suburban yuppie white woman on his porch. His greeting was as warm as his expression, "What do you want?" I took a deep breath and said, "I'm from St. Alban's down the street and we're planning the cleanup for this Friday, so we wanted to know if you needed any help and we also want to invite you to church on Sunday!" He squinted at me and said, "Why?" I smiled weakly at him and heard myself say, "Because we're really glad that no one was hurt and besides, you never know when you might be entertaining angels", which certainly surprised me, because I had never spontaneously quoted scripture in my life, and I wasn't even sure that Episcopalians were supposed to do that. And then he smiled, nodded his head and said, "You got that right!" He didn't come to church on Sunday, but we did help him retrieve his mini-barn from where the tornado had dropped it, three houses down the street.

I had noticed on Pentecost Sunday, when Peter and I worshipped with you, *incognito*, of course, that our poignant reading from the Letter to the Hebrews today is so important to you that it is printed in the bulletin every week, as both an invitation to those visiting and as a reminder to members of the parish. So imagine my delight when I found it was in our lectionary today. Perhaps we should read something into this little coincidence, or perhaps it is no coincidence at all, as we meet each other, face to face, for the first time.

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Peter, Max, and I have enjoyed all kinds of hospitality since we left Southern California, from friends, family, the National Parks Service, and the occasional stranger. Even at places like Yellowstone where Max was banned from hiking trails lest he become bear bait, he was always acknowledged, greeted and given a cookie by the ranger at the gate. One morning on the road, I had a very brief conversation with a Deputy Sheriff in Wyoming while I was walking Max. He wanted to be sure that I would see the field of sunflowers just outside of town. It was a lovely little moment of hospitality, and the sunflowers were indeed delightful. It got me to thinking about the full meaning of our text, and it struck me that while we were being treated by the strangers we encountered in our travels as though we might be angels, the very acts of hospitality brought out the angels in them as well. Funny how that happens.

There were other manifestations of hospitality along the road we traveled. For example, we passed through miles and miles of beautiful mountains and plains and it occurs to me that the concept of hospitality provides a very good framework for how you live on this planet. We passed through the lands of the Shoshone and the Cheyenne, the Lakota Sioux and the Iroquois. Indian sages always say that the earth is not ours; we merely live on it and should treat it as if we were guests. A respectful response to the hospitality offered by God's creation might help us generate positive images for our stewardship of the earth.

Hospitality can have some sobering aspects to it as well. One of the voices that I will call upon regularly is that of Dr. Clark Williamson. He was my theology professor and eventually became a friend as well. Clark categorizes himself as a Post-Holocaust theologian, meaning that we must always take great care with how we characterize Judaism, the Jewish religion and people. He is known to say that if you would not say something standing in front of the ovens at Auschwitz, then you'd better ask yourself why you even think it. One of his theology books is titled *Guest in the House of Israel*. One way thinking to safeguard our relationship with our Jewish brothers and sisters is to honor the framework of their faith, the faith of Jesus that we have received from them.

Most importantly, I think we should see hospitality as the beginning of relationship. If we keep ourselves isolated, there is no opportunity for friendship. An encounter with a stranger is the fertile soil from which we can harvest learning, growth and wonder—we learn to stretch ourselves. The Gospel of Luke this morning says, “When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed...” I don't think I ever really understood the truth of that until Faith Episcopal, my parish in California, began cooking dinner every Wednesday for the folks who live in their cars in the Walmart parking lot. The blessings that were poured on us were so unexpected; our minds were broadened, judgment was stripped away, our senses heightened, and our hearts opened. When two of the guys actually came to church on August 8 because it was my last Sunday, well, that opened up a few tears ducts and hearts. Did I mention that I'm a crier?



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Hospitality is not just about waiting for a stranger to walk through your door. It's an exercise in intellectual curiosity – who haven't you met or gotten to know, what haven't you learned, what stories have you not heard, what songs have you not sung?

As hard as it might be to welcome strangers into our nation and our lives, it is even more difficult to make room for new ideas and ways of seeing the world. As soon as we limit the lens through which we see the world, we begin to calcify, become rigid and unwelcoming. Jesus kept trying to pry open the minds of those around him. Unfortunately, those with power were not interested in new wisdom or a new way of seeing the world.

But please do not think that hospitality is an end unto itself. It is merely the beginning. How we embrace hospitality, in all its manifestations and ramifications, will help define the work ahead of us. There are always new people to welcome, and I know that you are good at that. You're really good at unpacking too! If our hospitality leads us to the entertaining of angels, it will also guide us into the process of relationship, with each other and God. My favorite way of understanding the Trinity is that of *community* of the three in the one. God is relationship, so when we work on our relationship with God and one another, we are living the life of the Eternal. Hospitality begets relationship, and Christ like relationships beget Eternal Life. And as you have extended the hospitality of the Trinity Branford community to me, Peter, and Max, so we begin our blessed relationship together, a journey of Eternal Life, not some time in the future but in this and every moment. Thank you for inviting us into your home.