

Entertaining Angels
Genesis 18:1-15; Hebrews 13:1-3
September 2, 2007

Parents wrestle with how to teach their children to deal with strangers. As the parent of a fairly extroverted and gregarious preschooler, I found my child talking to the person next to us in the grocery store line, the neighbor walking down the street, a child playing at the park. As he was always under the watchful eye of an adult in those situations, it felt appropriate and right to allow him the freedom to strike up a conversation with people he didn't know. He was far more likely to do so than his introverted mother! But there is also the cautious side of me that does not want him to fall into the hands of a stranger who may do him harm.

Today's scriptures challenge us to consider how we relate to people who differ from us and call us to offer hospitality to strangers. Hospitality is a major theme of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The reading from Hebrews includes the familiar word, *philadelphia*, meaning brotherly love. It also speaks of *xenophilia*, the love of strangers. In our days of terrorist alerts, border patrols, and tightened security, we are more prone to *xenophobia*, the fear of strangers. It is wise to exercise caution in dealing with those who are not known to us. However, using common sense and good judgment, as Christians we are also called to make room for strangers in our midst. This is not always an easy call to fulfill.

In her book, *Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open-Minded, Empathetic Children*, Sara Bullard lifts up some of our basic mental habits that tend to distance us from others. We easily **categorize**, "concluding that one person or situation is like another that we already know about." We make "mental file folders" of people who get on our nerves, people we will go out of our way to avoid, and people who intimidate us. Another mental habit is our tendency to **prefer the familiar over the unfamiliar**. We prefer people who are like us—those who speak the same language, dress the way we do, share our cultural customs—because they make us feel secure and accepted. A third tactic for finding security is a **ranking system** by which we "compare ourselves with others and then decide, by whatever act of imagination is required, that we are somehow smarter, stronger, kinder, or happier.... We can use our tendencies toward ranking and generalization to imagine not just one person, but a whole class of people to be 'less' than us."¹

Growing in the Christian practice of hospitality requires us to examine our mental habits and challenges us to give up the security of

misinformation for the surprises of reality. It requires an openness to embracing the stranger and finding an angel within.

In greeting the three strangers who came to his home, Abraham expresses no hesitation. He rushes from his tent to greet his guests. Bowing was an everyday gesture in his culture, appropriate for all visitors. Washing the feet of guests after a dusty journey on foot was an act of hospitality. Abraham provides more than the little bread he promised; he gives of the best he has, a calf! He stands nearby while they ate, attentive to their needs, understanding himself to be their servant.

As the story continues, Abraham and Sarah's gift of hospitality is reciprocated. The guests are messengers of God, angels, who bring the promise of a gift of a child even in their old age. It is often true that when we take the time to meet and host another person, we receive gifts from their very presence and our encounter together.

One of the challenges of hospitality in our global world today is how we relate to people of other religious traditions. "In 1965, a substantial revision of the immigration laws opened the United States to more persons coming from the nations of Asia and Africa. As a result, forty years later researchers estimate that there are more Muslims in the United States than there are Jews, Presbyterians, or Episcopalians, and more varieties of Buddhists in greater Los Angeles than any place else on earth....Most Christians want to find ways to live together with others in ways that honor both their Christian instincts of extending hospitality to strangers and their American commitments to being 'a nation of immigrants,' one nation made up of people from many cultures."²

Recent events in our own community highlight the importance of growing in our understanding of and engagement with people of other religions. Sunday, August 11 an arsonist set fire to one of East Contra Costa County's only mosques. The Islamic Center has also been the frequent victim of vandals and burglars, including gunfire and threatening voice mails. Such acts of hatred violate our nation's protection of the freedoms of expression, religion, and assembly. They are foreign to our Christian call to hospitality. As a member of the Interfaith Council, I am sending a monetary donation and a letter of solidarity to the Islamic Center expressing our congregation's concern and support in the face of this violence. On Sunday, September 23 in the afternoon a march and rally against hatred is planned in Antioch as an opportunity for us to express our solidarity with the Muslim community that has been victimized. I am planning to attend and invite you to consider participating with me.

Last week the *Contra Costa Times* called our attention to a new Homeland Security Department policy that singles out Sikh men for rigorous airport security searches at the discretion of screeners. Pat-downs of religious headgear are now permitted. For the world's 25 million Sikhs, the turban is an article of faith, only to be removed in the home or in private. While there is concern for security, I believe that we can balance that concern with respect for the religious customs of various traditions.

The United Methodist Church calls us to be neighbors and witnesses in interreligious relationships. A resolution from our General Conference states, "Today, our Lord's call to neighborliness (Luke 10:27) includes the 'strangers' of other faith traditions who live in our towns and cities. It is not just that historical events have forced us together. Christianity itself impels us to love our neighbors and to seek to live in contact and mutually beneficial relationships, in community, with them.

"What does it mean to be a neighbor? It means to meet other persons, to know them, to relate to them, to respect them, and to learn about their ways which may be quite different from our own. It means to create a sense of community in our neighborhoods, towns and cities and to make them places in which the unique customs of each group can be expressed and their values protected. It means to create social structures in which there is justice for all and that everyone can participate in shaping their life together 'in community.' Each race or group of people is not only allowed to be who they are, but their way of life is also valued and given full expression."³

This fall offers a unique opportunity to grow in understanding of other religious traditions. It is called the Holy Convergence. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the Jewish month of the High Holy Days and Sukkot coincide. During this time come the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi recognized by Roman Catholics and World Communion Sunday celebrated by Protestant and Orthodox Christians. Mahatma Gandhi's birthday is October 2 and Buddhist, Hindu, and other festivals also fall during this season. The convergence of these sacred days will not recur for another thirty years. Ancient tradition holds that Abraham's tent was open on four sides to embrace travelers from everywhere. In the tradition of Abraham's tent of hospitality, we will spend the next few Sundays looking at our relationships with other religious traditions in attempt to enlarge our understanding and grow in hospitality.

One cold December day in New York, the director of the Interfaith Center had very bad news for his staff. Their largest donors had cut back funding and the center could no longer pay its rent. It was about to become homeless.

Then just a few days before Christmas, an unlikely savior came. Sheikh Moussa Drammeh, an immigrant from Senegal, heard about their plight and offered the Interfaith Center room in a building where he was about to start a day care facility. The name of the newspaper article sharing this story is titled, “A Muslim Santa’s Gift to an Interfaith Group: Free Rent.”

In this rescue by a Muslim of a center where Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others could meet to work on common problems, the director saw a fitting parable, one that validated the very mission of his group. As Drammeh put it, “The more we know about each other and the more we are willing to sit down and drink and laugh together, the less we are inclined to shed blood.”⁴

The more we know about each other, the more we are willing to sit down, drink and laugh together, the less we are inclined to shed blood. May we contribute to the creation of a world where strangeness breeds not estrangement, but engagement. We cannot fully know the mysterious ways of God; thus we must be open to entertaining angels, for in embracing them we may discover that they, too, are messengers of God bearing surprising gifts of grace.

Giver of Life we thank you for this multi-colored, multi-cultural world in which we live. We thank you for the varied flavors we taste and the differing melodies we hear. We rejoice in the lessons we learn from one another. Grant us the desire to listen to our neighbors and receive the gifts they have to offer to us. Help us to grow in our own faith, that we might share it with others.

We praise you for the gifts given to all. Empower all your laborers to find fulfillment in their work. Protect those who risk their lives working in coal mines, on freeways, and on the battlefields. Guide those chosen to lead our nation, state, and community into directions for the health and well-being of all residents. Be present with teachers, educators, and students as they embark upon new academic years of learning. Empower social service workers, health care professionals, and all in positions of making lives wholesome.

Lead and guide this congregation to be a model of openness and fellowship with our neighbors. Keep our vision focused not on ourselves, but on others, those longing for your saving grace and other who may call us to stretch and grow....

¹ Sara Bullard, *Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open-Minded, Empathetic Children* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 22-30.

² Cynthia M. Campbell, *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 3-4.

³ Resolution 89. Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships, *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church – 2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004).

⁴ Joseph Berger, “A Muslim Santa’s Gift to an Interfaith Group: Free Rent,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2004, p. B3. Quoted by Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), p. 307.

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