

"Hospitality"**May 4, 2014****Rev. Alida Ward****Romans 12 and Hebrews 13**

It was a particularly hot July day in West Virginia, and the sun was right overhead. The crew of teens and adults that I was spending the day with was plum tuckered out from the work they'd be doing, tearing apart a rotting floor. So when someone suggested a break, there wasn't any argument, and we all dropped down on the grass in the little bit of shade that came from the neighbor's house.

And then out she came, the neighbor, who was actually the aunt of the person whose house we were fixing -- everybody tends to be family in the hollers of West Virginia. And she was carrying a big tray with her. "I've got fried pies for all of y'all," she said. There was a brief pause while our Connecticut teens pondered this. "We've never had fried pies," one of them finally said. "You don't eat fried pies where you come from?" said the neighbor lady. "Well, then," she said, "you are in for a treat." You eat these fried pies, and you are going to feel right at home."

She was right. I ate those fried pies, and I felt right at home. I felt about 20 pounds heavier, too -- there's a lot of lard involved in a fried pie.

And I started thinking about places I've been and the food that's welcomed me there. Last year, in Serbia, in the city of Belgrade, the host family that my daughter lived with for four months welcomed me and David when we came to visit with mountains of meat on the table -- the food culture there is not big on greens -- There was one dish that was bacon wrapped around meat wrapped around kidneys. And we ate it -- or did our best -- and we felt right at home. Or in India, where we have sat in homes with thatched roofs, drinking tea made with water buffalo milk, and eating food that explodes inside our mouths with sweat-inducing heat. And we feel at home, we do feel right at home.

All of that, of course, is hospitality, real hospitality -- opening wide the door of your home to let the stranger in, offering up gifts of welcome, sharing what it is that brings you comfort in order to make the newcomer feel comforted. "Here," said the neighbor lady, "this will make you feel right at home," and it does. That's hospitality. When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to his Christian friends in Roman, the letter to the Romans that Michelle was reading from, he listed out a bunch of things that you oughta to do if you're Christian. Be loving, he said, be enthusiastic, be hopeful, but also this, he said: be hospitable. Practice the art of hospitality, he said. Practice hospitality.

On Friday morning, at 10:00 a.m., the Dogwood Festival opened; this church's chance to practice hospitality by welcoming a whole bunch of folks to the top of this hill. And we've got pies -- maybe not fried pies -- but we got pies, and we've got ice cream, and we've got the grill going. But I want to share with you a moment of non-food-based hospitality that I witnessed right as the Festival began. The tradition is to ring the church bell at the start of the Festival, and our Art McCain was tasked with doing that. But this is what Art did. Instead of just ringing the bell, he went outside and looked to find someone else to ring it, someone who might particularly enjoy getting the chance to ring a church bell. And so it was that at 10 a.m., while I was in here making sure the altar looked okay, I heard loud shrieks of delight and a thunder of feet pounding up the balcony stairs. Art had found a group of learning-disabled teens, severely disabled, who had come here with their teachers, and he'd asked

them if they'd like to ring the bell. Well of course. And up into the balcony they all went, Art and the kids, and that bell was rung like it'd never been rung, everyone got a turn. There was laughter, and excitement, and screams of exuberance, and it was wonderful. And in the middle of it, Art, on behalf of this church, making people feel at home.

A moment like that, a moment of such joy and openness, welcome and warmth, a moment like that makes you see why the Bible says that hospitality isn't just a nice thing to do, but a faithful thing to do, a right and true thing to do.

The other passage that Michelle read was from the letter to the Hebrews, and it's got this great phrase in it. It says *practice hospitality to strangers, because by so doing, some have entertained angels without even knowing it*. Or as the old translations put it, "entertained angels unawares."

Entertaining angels unawares.

It made me think of that old, old folktale about a King in a kingdom long long ago and far far away, a king who had no child, and so he declared that he would pick his heir from among the people of his kingdom; He announced that whoever he decided most worthy would inherit his palaces and gold. And you might know how the story goes, because it's a story that's been told in most every country, most every culture. The king put on the robes of a beggar and went wandering through the streets of the city, his city, knocking on door after door, and was turned away from every door -- dressed as he was in filthy rags. Until, of course, he reached the home of -- well, here's where the story varies -- a gentle old woman, or a kind young man, or a compassionate girl ... and it was that person who welcomed him in, sat him down, and gave him -- fried pies, perhaps? or meat wrapped in meat wrapped in bacon, or tea with buffalo milk. Whatever it was, whoever it was, it was real hospitality.

And you know how the story ends. The beggar says "look, it is I, your king, and you shall, my son, shall inherit the kingdom, for you alone have welcomed me" -- Or in the Chinese version of the story, the beggar says "look, it is I, The Lord of the Cranes, and you shall live a life of good fortune." or in the Jewish folktale, the beggar says "look, it is I, Elijah, and you shall be blessed." No matter how it is told or where it is told, the moral is the same: offer kindness to the hurting, offer welcome to the needy, offer hospitality to the stranger, because the one outside your threshold may be bringing you a blessing. Practice hospitality, and you may entertain angels unawares.

But the scripture is even bigger than that. Hospitality, true hospitality, isn't just about opening the door. Hospitality, true hospitality is about opening your eyes, opening your mind, opening your heart. Hospitality, true hospitality, is a hospitality of spirit. It is an openness to someone else, a willingness to see someone else as the presence of God. It might just be an angel standing there in front of you, says the scripture, and I think that's another way of saying that if you welcome others with openness of spirit, there is something holy that can happen then.

You know the Hindu word 'namaste' -- it's been translated to me as 'the spirit in me meets the spirit in you' -- and that, that right there is what happens in truest hospitality. An openness to another person, a willingness to know them, and to hear them, and to listen to them, that is the greater hospitality to which we're called, way beyond pie, as good as pie is. And there's no question that we live in a time that needs a whole lot **more** of that truest hospitality.

I read an article the other day which reported on the results of a study. The study found that if you put two people together of strongly differing opinions, and you tell them that they have as much time as

they want to try to show the other person why their particular point of view is valid, this is what will happen: The result will not be a beautiful coming together of two minds, not a thoughtful harmonizing of ideas, but will in fact result in each person being more firmly dug in. The longer they talked, the study found, the more entrenched they were.

This is probably not something that required a study to prove. Some rapid channel surfing in any given news cycle would work just as well, or just an hour of observation at any cocktail party. We live in argumentative times.

What we **need** is people of hospitality, true hospitality. What we are called to be are people who welcome others in, not just across the threshold of our home or our church, but across the threshold of our hearts. What we are called to be are people who are open to others, willing to allow their thoughts into **our** thoughts, willing to listen with a generosity of spirit, to see as another sees. To entertain the possibility -- the reality -- that the other person is a child of God, and can be for us the presence of God. To entertain, that is, angels -- and maybe not so unawares.

In contrast to that article I told you about, about the way we dig in our heels and close off our minds, I read a story this week about Joan Baez. Joan Baez is now in her early 70's, but still touring -- all these folks are still touring -- and the story was about a concert she did in Idaho, not that long ago. When Baez arrived at the venue, she was told that there were protesters out front, a group of Vietnam veterans, also in their 60's and 70's. They had posters that said "Joan Baez is a traitor," "Joan Baez gave aid and comfort to our enemy in Vietnam". All of course referring to her anti-war stance, more than forty years ago.

It was less than an hour until her concert, but this is what she did -- she walked out to the street to talk to them. And the person who wrote the article, who watched all this happen, said that what Baez did most of all was listen. She listened as the veterans talked about how they'd felt betrayed when they returned back home, and what that had been like. She told them that it mattered to her, and it had always mattered. And here's what happened. "Her acceptance of their stories," the reporter wrote, "and her willingness to hear them out began to melt their anger. In a twist that seems hard to fathom, they asked her to sign their posters." She offered them tickets to her concert, and during the concert Joan Baez dedicated a song to them, and said, "I feel like I made four new friends tonight."

What she was doing was practicing true hospitality. Letting someone in: their words, their hurt, their need, their anger, their opinion. Welcoming *unwelcoming* words, listening with gentle care. That's hospitable. Not easy, but hospitable. Practice hospitality, says the scripture, and you may entertain an angel unawares. You may bump right up against God's own spirit.

In just a few minutes, we're going to eat a simple meal together, as guests of someone whose hospitality is legendary. A host who put on dinner parties to which everyone was welcome, from the beggar on the street to the richest guy in town. A man who listened to each person as if they were the most important person in his life, who was interested in everyone, who made room in his heart for ... the whole world.

Each one of us is invited to this meal. Each one of us is welcome. Christ's hospitality is legendary. His only request is that ours be the same. Amen.