

August 29, 2010

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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I was a waitress for several years through college and seminary. I worked in a coffee shop, in a famous brunch place, a pizza joint, a Malaysian restaurant. If I may toot my own horn for a moment, I was a darn good waitress and, while I didn't always love the work, I usually liked it. I am of the opinion that everyone should work in a restaurant, or at least in the low-level hospitality or service industry, at least once. It is humbling. And most everyone I know who has ever waited tables is a more sympathetic customer and a great tipper. People are often at their worst when they are hungry and paying for food and service, feeling entitled and greater than.

People who serve can get really good at faking a good attitude. The livelihood of a waiter depends on it, after all. On a good night, each new table is a new chance at a good tip. On a bad night, they're just trying not to drop a plate of lobster on someone's head. The stream of new faces, new peculiarities, new complaints, and occasionally, new appreciative smiles is what makes restaurant work exciting and challenging. And, like I said, humbling.

At one of the restaurants where I worked, in an attempt to get better "service" ratings in the ZAGAT guide, the manager hired a company that sent "spotters." Spotters are restaurant reviewers who come incognito and, instead of writing for the local paper, report every last detail back to management. The mere mention of spotters can strike fear in the hearts of conscientious wait staff everywhere. A spotter's negative report can cost a waiter her job.

It is a smart system, of course, because all the managers have to do is mention that they *might* have called the spotting company and they *might* be coming in the next week or so and the mere suggestion can straighten out a lax staff. Every table might have one of these spies lurking at it. It can be terrifying.

This is what instantly comes to mind every time I hear that I might be entertaining angels without knowing it. Truth be told, I'm just a little terrified. It is one of those little tidbits in the Bible that makes me think, "really, God? Some of us are doing our best to get our shoes on the right feet in the morning. Do we really need the added pressure of incognito angels?"

Does terrify a little, doesn't it, as if these messengers of God will be reporting back to the big guy. And while I like the idea of everyone on their best behavior, just in case, I'm not really sure I'd want to entertain angels. That is a lot of pressure after all.

What would I talk about? What would I serve? What would I wear? What if the one day I leave the house without brushing my teeth, the angels show up? Or what if my kid has a nuclear meltdown when I'm trying to talk to an angel? The idea of entertaining angels is just too anxiety-inducing. No thank you, God, keep your angels where we can see them.

Like so many things in Scriptures, though, when I settle down and put my own fears on the shelf and think about what this letter to the Hebrews is offering, I know that this is not really about terrifying us mere mortals.

This is not about reporting back to the boss. These angels that we may or may not be entertaining are not God's spies, sent down to evaluate whether we are reciting the daily specials properly and have put out clean wine glasses.

This is about getting to know God. This is about relationship and how we treat one another. Abraham knew this when the incognito angels showed up on his doorstep. His instinct was to care for them, to offer them food and shelter. And in doing so, he changed not only the course of his life, but the course of history.

Remember, friends, the way we get to know God is through right relationship with one another. When we are showing hospitality to strangers, it is not because we hope that we will get good marks, that we're getting spied upon or that we're being tricked by God to find out whether or not we're following the rules.

Instead, when we are treating every one of our brothers and sisters here on earth as if they could, just maybe, just might be an angel, we are strengthening our relationships with one another. We are practicing seeing the face of Christ in every face. And Christ is there, in every face, angel or no, whether we can see it or not.

If we are doing this out of fear of some sort of reprisal, out of desire to save our own skin, I think we're likely missing the point. If we are instead offering hospitality to strangers in order that we just might

And what is hospitality?

In this case, it is anything that recognizes the humanity in another human being. I am not of the opinion that hospitality needs to be painful or extreme. A cup of water, an unexpected smile, actually speaking to someone you don't yet know, holding the door.

Or maybe I'll amend my own definition and say that hospitality is that which recognizes the angel in every human being, the potential for every person to be among the heavenly host.

This is not easy work. It doesn't have to be painful, but it will stretch us sometimes beyond what we expect of ourselves.

The Gospel rarely calls us into easy work. Putting yourself out there to a stranger who may not look or think or act or smell like you is uncomfortable and risky. It is easier to be prudent. You might get hurt. You might get fleeced. The stranger might be a liar or a cheat. You might lose your wallet.

Or you might lose your heart. The stranger might be an angel. You might see heaven and earth break open before you. You might accidentally help usher in the kingdom through a small but uncalled for act of hospitality. You just might.