

We're in the Hospitality Business.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

14th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 17, Year C. September 2, 2007 (Text: Hebrews 13:1-2)

The church is in the hospitality business. Did you know that? It's not just hotels and restaurants in Aspen that are in the hospitality business, we are too! The second Bible reading for this morning, from the 13th chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, begins with these words: *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Right up to modern times, the "law of hospitality" prevailed almost everywhere in the world. It was understood slightly differently in different cultures, but the basic idea was always the same: if somebody came to your home needing shelter, it was your moral and religious duty to take them in, provide them with a place to sleep, feed them, protect them from enemies who might be pursuing them, and treat them as members of your household. And it was their duty not to presume on your hospitality for longer than was reasonable. In due course, when it was safe to do so, they were expected to move on, not move in. But as long as they were under your roof, you were obligated to take care of them.

In our own country, back in frontier days, it was not uncommon for travelers to knock at a farmhouse door and ask for a place to sleep. Towns with hotels were few and far between, and settlers expected to extend hospitality to strangers on the road. Wayfarers – whether an individual or a whole family – might have to sleep in the hayloft, but they'd never be sent away. And they'd be offered a share of the family's supper, too, before being shown to the barn, where their animals would also be given shelter and fodder. When a solitary traveler on a horse or a family in a wagon continued their journey, the host family would always provide something for them to eat on the way – even if it was just a hunk of cornbread and some cold bacon.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. In the Bible, angels always brought a message from God. That was their job; and it still is. In fact, the word "angel" means *messenger*. But sometimes those to whom a heavenly messenger came didn't recognize right off that they were dealing with anybody special, much less an angel, because the angel had arrived in disguise. Angels could look just like anybody else until there was a moment of revelation and their identity was disclosed. In fact, I'd say that there are people among us who are "angels" and don't even know it! The point is that the message from God which the angel speaks is what's really important, not the angel himself. —But if we fail to be hospitable, if we fail to take time to listen to the angels who come our way, we'll fail to hear the message they bring us from God.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Christ Church is in the hospitality business. When we had the exhibit of plans and drawings of the remodeled church on display in the library, you might have noticed that the new gathering space on the main floor, the space we're naming in honor of Peggy Rowland and Marian Davis, is labeled the "hospitality hall." That's a deliberate decision. We want to emphasize our church's ministry of hospitality to the stranger and welcome to the wayfarer. I hope that somewhere in that new room we'll have a plaque with this Bible verse inscribed on it.

All of us Episcopalians who've driven from town to town around America are familiar with the old red-white-and blue "*The Episcopal Church Welcomes You*" signs. You know the ones I mean, the ones with the church shield on them that you can see on street corners all over the country. (We'd have one hanging on the lamp-post down at 5th and Main Street if the Aspen sign code would allow it.) Well intentioned critics within our church have said these old signs are boring and their message is trite. Maybe so. "*The Episcopal Church Welcomes You*" is a bit bland. It's not "with-it." It doesn't tell people that we're a

“happening” church. We should probably have a more electrifying message, something really 21st century in orientation that will make passers-by want to come check us out on Sunday, such as: “*Guess what? The Episcopal Church is really cooler than you thought!*” (On the other hand, I guess maybe that wouldn’t be quite the right message either.)

It’s true that the sign we’ve always used is old-fashioned. Its graphics aren’t contemporary. A picture of the Episcopal Church shield is not particularly enticing. But there’s another side to the argument. If the message on our signs is sincere rather than phony, then it is *very* up-to-the-moment, very relevant indeed. At a time when American society feels terribly polarized, when people might *not* be welcome in certain churches if they have the “wrong” theology, or the “wrong” politics, or the “wrong” accent, or the “wrong” lifestyle, it’s vital for us to proclaim the old message that “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” For people who have felt *un*-welcome elsewhere, a church that announces “*We welcome you*” – and means it! – will seem exceedingly attractive.

Some people may see this as a weakness in our church, but I see it as a virtue: We don’t screen those who want to join us in order to eliminate any who don’t fit some pre-established mold. You don’t have to pass a doctrinal test. There’s no Bible quiz, not even “pass/fail.” We won’t pry into your personal history. We just do these simple things: We proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We express our theology concisely in the Nicene Creed. We share the sacrament of our Savior’s Body and Blood every week. And we believe that we’re sent into the world in Jesus’ name to love other people – *all* other people – with Jesus’ love. That’s our life. If it’s attractive to you and you want to share it, you’re welcome. The Episcopal Church welcomes you!

The practice of authentic hospitality – a sincere, heartfelt, arms-open-wide welcome to everybody – is a ministry entrusted to us by Christ himself, who said “*Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.*” Authentic hospitality means more to most people who visit a church than a great sermon does, or music from a paid choir, or classes taught by brilliant teachers. Hospitality lies deep in the heart of the message of Jesus. Someone said that hospitality is like the seed sown in good soil which brings forth a hundred or thousand-fold harvest.

We expect that from April of 2008 until Easter, 2009, while our building is under construction, we’re going to be holding our Sunday services somewhere else, and I don’t yet know where that’s going to be. But wherever it is, we’re going to be a whole congregation of people needing hospitality! The very fact that we’ll be “wayfarers” of a sort, needing to be welcomed by others, is going to be a significant learning experience for us.

And during the time next year that we’re worshipping “off campus” we’re going to be depending on one another in our congregation to demonstrate mutual love and hospitality in different ways. Some events that usually happen here in the church building will need to take place elsewhere. We’ll want to plan for small groups to gather in homes for fellowship, study, prayer, and ministry formation. And if we’re going to keep up our practice of hospitality to strangers, we’ll need to make sure that we reach out to our guests and visitors from near and far and include them in all our “home-based” small group events. Sure, it’s going to feel different next summer. Sure, it’s going to be a challenge. But it’s also going to be a time when God can teach us lessons we might never learn otherwise.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Let’s ask God for teachable hearts and readiness to welcome and heed the messages brought by all the angels that come our way.