

Got a Date With an Angel

Harry Freebairn

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

Genesis 18:1-15

Ephesians 2:11-22

Text: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews 13:1-2

A Kansan who owned a general store made it a habit to offer a verse of scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. The group of people who sat around the store in this rural area enjoyed the exchanges, because some of the purchases challenged the imagination, and the store owner's honesty.

One winter day a Texan stopped in, wanting to buy a blanket for his horse. The locals knew that the store stocked two types of blankets. One sold for \$60, and the expensive one cost \$89.95. He showed the first. "No, that's not good enough. I need something warmer for my horse." He showed the second type, for \$89.95. "That's not good enough, either. Don't you understand? This is for my horse, and nothing's too good for my horse. Now show me your most expensive blanket!"

The store became very quiet as the storekeeper reached under the counter to the \$89.95 stock, pulled out a plaid one, and spread it on the counter with great finesse. "This is our finest, the only one I have. Colorfast, 100 percent wool, with a very tight weave. It sells for \$250." "Now you are talking. I'll take it." He counted out the money, folded the blanket, and left with a big grin on his face.

As the shopkeeper opened the cash drawer and carefully counted the money he said, "Matthew 25:35, altered version: 'He was a stranger, and I took him in.'"

John Koenig calls this kind of treatment the "shadow side of hospitality." Often when it happens, strangers receive it, even those who don't ask for it. It probably begins consciously when we are children and instructed never to talk to them. Our suspicion of strangers seems almost primeval, rooted way back in the psyche. We sense that strangers endanger us. Our instruction as God's people calls us to reach out, but prudence tells us to hold back for safety's sake, especially in this urban culture of ours. Block Watch signs indicate that strangers here are under surveillance, and for good reason. Never mind that most crimes are committed by people we know.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that "Fear and hostility are not limited to our encounters with burglars, drug addicts, or strangely behaving types." Because competition pervades our world and work, we learn to treat people close to us as strangers when they pose a threat to our intellectual or professional safety. Students in classrooms, staff members in helping and nurturing places find themselves pushing potential friends away because they need so badly to get ahead. Those places that were designed to bring out the best in people generate the worst in colleagues, as they become strangers to us and we do them in.

But what is it like to be the stranger? Since we moved to Princeton almost three years ago, the memories are quite fresh. Let me share a few. First, you live in a high state of alertness, even without the benefit of caffeine. That's because you have to think about everything. Once you reach the end of the driveway you are in foreign

territory. Which way do I turn to go to ...? You spend a great deal of time being lost. Next, you encounter the suspicion extended to new people. You have to prove that you have a reason to be wherever you are. Shop personnel look sharply at your checks. You suffer the indignities of the Department of Motor Vehicles because you need the photo ID to go anywhere and purchase anything. Third, as a stranger you reconnect with those awkward days of adolescence as you try to find friends. As you get ready to make a foray into a new place you wonder what they wear here? How do we begin conversations? Will they like me and will I fit in, and do I have the energy to go through the initiation rites? Finally, you depend heavily on hospitality as you gravitate toward smiling faces and folks who exemplify welcome. You carry the red cup at Coffee Hour and hope that someone will notice it. You feel like a pest if you recognize anyone, because you latch onto those people like a leech, and you do not care. You recall the first people who said hello, and hold them in a special place in your heart. You hear yourself saying that you will never move again, and you understand why relocation ranks so high on the chart of stressors!

You find yourself in total agreement with George Graham, who writes:

Our society seems to be increasingly fearful of people who are different. During my year abroad the hospitality I received helped break down the barriers I faced. Perhaps a renewal in our lives of the concept of biblical hospitality is one way to address the gnawing fear of difference in our society.¹

So, What does the Bible have to say about hospitality? First, scripture points us to our perspective. As God's people we are strangers, all of us, who are on the journey together through this dangerous world. The ancient credo of the Hebrews, "A wandering Aramean was my father..." defines us. John repeats it in the words of Jesus who declares us "in but not of the world." We seek the city which is to come, says the letter to the Hebrews. We live outside the camp, and are a peculiar people called out of darkness into God's marvelous light. The old spiritual sums it up well:

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through;
My treasure is laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
and I don't feel at home in this world anymore....

If we are strangers by definition, then we know how to recognize other strangers. Having been strangers ourselves, we know what strangers need to feel at home with us. The Genesis story tells of the graciousness of Abraham, that first wanderer by call of God. He recalls the footsore feeling, so he provides water to wash the visitors' hot and weary feet, and invites them to sit in the shade of the oak trees since they have been beaten down by the hot sun. When you've been on the road nothing tastes better than good home cooking. He has fresh bread brought out. He directs that a tender calf be prepared for their dinner. This lovely picture of Eastern hospitality serves as a paradigm for the welcome strangers deserve. In the serving resides the reminder: This is who I am, and this is where I have been.

The story reminds us that the strangers do not come empty-handed. They come

into our midst with experiences, with gifts, and with promises. In this case, they come to reiterate a promise about a son. Sarah, Abraham's wife, for whom Retin-A has long since ceased to work, laughs. What an incredible thought! This time, however, when Abraham and Sarah cannot bring off the promise because they are simply beyond the age to reproduce, God does it. The promise becomes reality because God delivers the word in person, in their home. These two old people entertain angels - God's messengers - without knowing it. That represents the promise of the stranger!

"Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy," writes Henri Nouwen.

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. ...Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.²

In other words, hospitality offers the opportunity to have a date with an angel, over against the awareness of our fear of the unknown and our sense that we must protect ourselves and build fortresses against the stranger. Because the stranger offers such promise (he or she may be Christ Jesus himself), scripture encourages us to trust that the dividing wall has been broken down and act on God's promise.

Sue Monk Kidd tells of an incident during the summer when she was twelve, that eventually changed her life, though she did not know it at the time. Under duress she had gone to visit a nursing home with her church's youth group. Her mother insisted that she go, even though summer was winding down, time for the local pool was disappearing, and her friends were not doing what she had to do.

Smarting from the inequity, I stood before this ancient-looking woman, holding a bouquet of crepe paper flowers. Everything about her saddened me - the worn-down face, the lopsided grin, the tendrils of gray hair protruding from a crocheted lavender cap. I threw the bouquet at her. She looked at me, a look that pierced me to the marrow of my twelve-year-old bones. Then she spoke the words I haven't forgotten for nearly thirty years. "You didn't want to come, did you, child?"

The words stunned me. They were too painful, too powerful, too naked in their honesty. "Oh, yes, I wanted to come," I protested.

A smile lifted one side of her mouth. "It's okay," she said. "You can't force the heart."³

But if she had not met this stranger, perhaps her heart would never have been pushed toward the new direction of compassion. She entertained an angel without realizing it.

As churches burn because racial lines refuse to be blurred; as news from military bases causes all of us to be ashamed; as violence becomes the heritage of children in cities and quiet communities like this one, the call to hospitality takes on renewed urgency. It cannot happen out there if it does not happen here. Here the insider and the outsider have gifts to offer one another, if only we follow Christ's invitation to

listen and reach out and meet Him in one another.

Notes

1. George Graham, *Alive Now* (Sept-Oct 1995): 4
2. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 51.
3. Sue Monk Kidd, *Weavings*, "Compassion" issue.