

“Entertaining angels unawares”
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In 2013, a cell phone company in Thailand produced a video that went viral, getting more than 20 million views on YouTube alone. It’s a commercial but not the kind we are used to: in the words of journalist Timothy Blotz, it doesn’t sell a product; it sells an idea. It’s an advertisement for kindness.

In the opening scene, a shopkeeper is chasing a young boy into a crowded street, cluttered with signs of poverty. She calls the boy a thief and grabs hold of him. Stabbing her hands into his pockets, she pulls out several stolen items: boxes of pain killers and a jar of medicine. Slapping his head, she demands to know why he stole from her. He stands there, silent, his shaven head bowed low. Eventually, he sputters, saying that he was going to give it to his mom.

At this moment, a stranger intervenes, a man, wearing an apron, a washcloth around his neck, and dingy clothes. He runs a small food dispensary across the street. He asks the boy if his mom is sick. And when the boy slightly nods his head, still staring at the ground, the man pulls out the only money in his pocket, gives it to the shopkeeper, and then tells his young daughter (who gives him a “geez, dad, you’re so embarrassing” look) to bring some vegetable soup. He places the soup and the medicine in a bag and gives it to the boy, who for the first time makes eye contact and then quickly runs off, without ever saying a word.

Now, there’s more to the video, but I’m going to pause here, because usually in life this as far as we get: we don’t get to see what happens to the boy on the street. We don’t get to find out if our kindness actually made a difference or not.

What we do get to see is the long line of people who also need our help.

It's a beautiful image, this man helping this boy, and these are beautiful words we have read in our Scripture passage this morning, words about kindness toward strangers and sharing all that we have. We, as followers of Christ, want to do these things.

But the truth is that the beauty of it all can quickly get covered up by the muck of life. We get tired. We get overwhelmed. We find we no longer have enough for ourselves or our families after giving so much away. Occasionally, we are made the fool by those who would take advantage of such kindness.

Or maybe we get to the point where we've seen too much of charity—seen how it can create demeaning, hierarchical models of dependence and inferiority that do little to alter the systemic causes of a hurting world.

Suddenly, we may be inclined to regard this beautiful image, and these beautiful words, with skepticism. The same kind of skepticism that I suspect the audience of the Epistle to the Hebrews had. You see, these second or third generation Christians were having a hard time. They have been imprisoned and tortured for their beliefs. They have been robbed of their property. And now, scholar Amy Peeler tells us, the author of Hebrews is asking this “beleaguered, suffering, and vulnerable community... to open itself up as a patron to strangers.”

It feels unfair to ask a community that has already given so much to give more, to risk more.

Perhaps this is just our cross to bear. After all, much of the Epistle to the Hebrews is devoted to preparing the Christian community for times of trial and suffering, for sacrifice.

But is that all hospitality is: another cross to bear?

Let's go back to the video.

After the boy runs off, with his medicine and soup, the screen goes dark, flashing forward 30 years. And the man's still at it: still handing out food to the hungry. But then something terrible happens. Our hero wobbles, struck by a heart attack or a stroke, falls backwards, and strikes his head on a table, while his screaming daughter, now all grown up, rushes toward him.

What comes after has no words; it's just a series of moments: the man in a hospital bed, unconscious, his head bandaged, tubes coming out of his body; his daughter crying; a nurse handing her a bill with an astronomical amount owed; an empty kitchen where her father once stood; an urgent for-sale sign on their restaurant; and then a note tucked under her arm when she fell asleep, gripping her father. The note at first looks like another bill, but when she gets to the bottom, it says: "Summary of Medical Expenses: Zero. All expenses paid 30 years ago with 3 packs of painkillers and a bag of veggie soup." It's signed Dr. Prajak Arunthong. The boy, the stranger, had grown up to be a doctor, whose walls are lined with photos of smiling people he now helps.

It would seem that our hero had entertained an angel without knowing it.

I love this line in our passage today: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Abraham in the Book of Genesis entertained angels unawares when he brought water and food to three strangers and washed their feet. The two disciples walking the road to Emmaus entertained their own savior Jesus Christ without realizing it until he broke bread with them.

How many angels have you entertained without knowing it? How many angels have we served food to at the Salvation Army Miracle Kitchen? How many angels from Korea, arriving for Triennium, have our families hosted? How many angels have begged for help from us on the

street, or cried out from the prison that's just a few blocks away, or sat alone in a nursing home, or wandered even into this church?

We never know what potential resides in a person.

Now, our author may have had literal angels in mind when he wrote this epistle. But the Greek word for angel, *angelos*, simply means messenger. And in that sense, anyone bearing the image of God—and of course, that's all of us—could be an angel. An angel is simply someone who shares with you something you need to hear, see, experience, or receive. It's someone through whom God is working.

And if that's the case, then hospitality isn't about giving and giving until you have nothing left. It's about God entering your life through a stranger and giving you both what you both need.

This's why our author begins with such an emphasis on “*mutual* love.”

Hospitality was a *mutual* experience in the ancient world. It protected strangers, fed them, and gave them a place to stay. But it also gave something to the hosts.

“Many ancients were locked into lives of routine and did not stray far from their places of birth,” writes New Testament scholar Amy Peeler. “One way in which the world became ‘larger’ was to open one’s home (however poor) to those that came from ‘outside.’... The unknown seekers of hospitality brought news (and stories!) of the wider world and broke open one’s little provincial world. There was a kind of marvelous exchange, then, of mutual benefit between host and guest.”

Not only do these strangers share with us perspectives and experiences that widen our worldview, but more than that, through them we encounter Christ and are thus led out of ourselves. This is partly what our author means by a “sacrifice of praise.”

We are indeed giving something up when we show kindness and welcome to others. We are sharing our possessions, our time, our energy. We are sacrificing our small and secure, familiar worlds. But we get something praiseworthy in return: we are invited to a much larger banquet.

There we are fed and nourished just as much as our guests are.

Now, our author isn't naive; there will still be times when our kindness falls on rocky soil and does not take root. There will be times when our kindness is met with only enmity or exploitation. The Gospels, as full as they are with the sufferings of Christ at the hands of those whom he tried to help, are not naive on this front. They simply insist that hospitality is worth the risk. Because, regardless of whether that stranger also hears the call of mutual love or not, God is present and will feed you.

At this banquet, God becomes the ultimate host.

Indeed, throughout the New Testament, Jesus enters villages as a stranger, vulnerable and hungry. Some open their doors—and their lives—to him, giving him a home and a meal. And often, even without a place of his own, Jesus then turns the tables and becomes host to them. He breaks open their little worlds and shows the kingdom of God.

That's what it means to entertain angels. And those angels... they're all around you. **Amen.**