

Sermon: August 28, 2016 – Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Twenty years ago, our family was heading out for a camping holiday in the Okanagan: Shannon, me, two 8-year-olds and an almost-4-year-old, loaded into our contemptible station wagon. We'd had a tough day's drive in the mountains because of an overheating engine, but that particular vehicle was such a lemon we didn't give much thought to the brief stops by the side of the road to deal with the repeatedly-steaming radiator. But as we were crossing the bridge west of Kelowna, I checked the rear-view mirror and saw a prodigious plume of dark grey smoke billowing out the back of our wagon.

We managed to get across the bridge, up the hill a bit to a place where we could safely pull over, and at that safe place the steering wheel locked, the engine seized and we were done. Worried about what would come next, with three very frightened children in the back seat, we hadn't been there more than a minute when a cheery older gentleman with a little red pickup truck pulled in behind us. He'd seen the smoke, recognized a blown head gasket when he saw one, and asked us if could lend a hand.

He'd seen our Alberta plates so we struck up the usual "where are you from?" conversation. At that point we were living in Calgary & he indicated that he'd grown up in Alberta, in a little town we'd likely never heard of: Trochu. Never heard of it, eh? Shannon was the Minister in Trochu just a year earlier, and that many of the folks this man had grown up with were also our dear friends from our beloved little town.

Not only was he a guy from "back home," he was a retired mechanic so he knew which garage to recommend, and knew all the tow truck drivers by name. Which was a good thing, because there was a labour dispute involving the tow trucks & he was able to call in a favour to get us towed to a reputable garage within the hour, rather than waiting until that evening, or never.

As we headed off to the garage, we were deeply aware of the caring presence of angels. While I don't attribute every coincidence in life to divine involvement, at no time did this just feel like "good fortune." There are moments in life when it there are indeed "Angels Among Us."

[show "Angels Among Us" video clip, see link below]

When someone perceives our need in a profoundly accurate and/or timely manner, it is a holy moment, a moment where we truly feel "touched by an angel," and we are inspired toward gratitude. Our reading from Hebrews, however, is speaking more about ministering TO an angel, than being ministered to BY an angel, saying (in the lyrical words of the King James Version) "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2)

In the ancient middle east, the existence of angels was a given – within Judaism and Christianity, and within the religion of their neighbours, these messengers between heaven and earth play a role. But you'd think that angels were the kind of beings that would *bring* kindness, rather than being on the receiving end, wouldn't you? Well, perhaps in my thinking it works that way, but the Jewish Christians would hear these words of "entertaining angels unawares," as a trigger for one specific religious memory. Professor George Guthrie puts it like so:

"Almost certainly the allusion is to the story of Abraham in Genesis 18:1–16, who among first-century Jews...was considered the premier model of hospitality. In that passage Abraham hosts Yahweh and two angels (18:12; cf. 19:1). He runs to greet them, paying them homage (18:2), providing water to wash their feet (18:4), giving them a place to rest (18:4), feeding them with a feast of quality bread, meat, and dairy (18:5–8), and escorting them down the road as they leave (18:16). These were considered exemplary acts of hospitality.

"The author [of Hebrews] picked up the Abraham story, not primarily to focus on angelic beings but to highlight a great example of hospitality. So his main point is not, "A supernatural experience with an extraterrestrial being might be missed if you don't listen to me!" Rather, he is exhorting his readers: "Be characterized by exemplary hospitality; be like Abraham." In other words, cultivate an open home and life in regard to other people." - see the opportunities, presented by angels, to welcome without reserve.

In that time and place, nobody needed to be told about the basics of hospitality. There were few formal "Inns" where people could stay, and almost none where you could sleep soundly without fear of getting

robbed or assaulted, so everyone was expected to take a turn opening their homes to those who needed a room for the night – that’s just what you did if you lived in that part of the world, and every middle-eastern culture knew that. What Professor Guthrie is getting at, is that the 13th chapter of Hebrews wants its Jewish Christian audience to ramp it up: not just doing the minimum requirement of helping out now and then, but rather, showing a prodigious, ridiculous amount of welcome. Hebrews challenges those Christians – and us, I believe - to shock people by their willingness to help anyone and everyone, to get past the notion of hospitality as duty, to see the offering of hospitality, especially when it was hard or burdensome, as an opportunity to really shine Christ’s love into someone’s life.

But I differ from Professor Guthrie, in that I think the reference to angels is important on its own, not just as a cue to get the listeners thinking about Abraham. For me, when the writer of Hebrews implies that SOME acts of hospitality might be holy encounter with angels I wonder if he or she is really saying, that EVERY act of hospitality is a holy encounter. I think I sense a bit of a wink here, an inside joke shared with those who already exhibit exemplary hospitality. Someone who only does the minimum might only see the burden in offering hospitality, its cost, its inconvenience, its hassle; but those who show hospitality all the time know that every time we give or receive hospitality, God’s grace takes human form. Not just some of the time, all of the time. We don’t offer hospitality on the off chance that we might be dealing with angels; we offer hospitality in the knowledge that every single interaction with our neighbour can reveal the beauty of God’s love. So I’d say that the holiness of the angels is with us, every time we welcome, every time we forgive, every time we listen, every time we withhold judgment, every time our kindness exceeds expectations. Not just some of the time; all of the time. As Jesus said in the 25th chapter of Matthew, each time we house the homeless or feed the hungry or befriend the friendless, we are offering that hospitality directly to him. Not just some of the time; all of the time.

This, to me, says so much about what it means to be part of a religious community. While some people turn to religion out of habit, or fear or confusion, or as a way to assert power, my experience is that most believers are motivated first and foremost by a simple desire to make the world a better place. We start with a desire to bring the active, practical love of Jesus Christ to life, and as we care, as we help, as we push for change, we learn more about God. Each loving action builds up the giver, the receiver, the community of faith, and the community at large.

As we mark the 125th anniversary of this Church building, I think there was one simple reason why *this* Church was built right in the middle of town, and that’s because the needs of the community and the congregation’s need to actively express God’s care for the world have grown up side by side. Back in 1891, according to Miss Minnie Fulton, in addition to needing a place to gather and sing praise to God, what Canmore needed most was an alternative to just drinking yourself into oblivion. And so this Church organized a “social and literary society” to give people something else to do and, of course, became home base for the local temperance union. In a rough-edged mining town, mostly single men who had come from other towns and other nations, Canmore Presbyterian Church understood from day one what it meant to put true, meaningful hospitality at the core of their being, when doing so required much diligence and hard work. While “hospitality” is a nice, sunny word, sometimes it’s not easy to be hospitable!

Fast-forwarding to 2016, what kind of hospitality are we called to? Well, first of all I need to affirm what’s already happening. There’s our participation at the Monday night “Food and Friends” nights, which has been such a great thing for this town. There’s the open spirituality of Evensong and Healing Pathway and Threshold Choir, which invite people wanting to come close to God in new ways. There’s your generous support of the benevolent fund on Communion Sundays. There’s your innate ability to express welcome to new folks, at the door, at coffee time, in the pews, and beyond this place. There’s the “right relations summer book club” and other follow-ups to the Truth and Reconciliation report, which invite the community to walk in meaningful ways with our Aboriginal sisters and brothers. There’s the Bow Valley Syria Refugee Project, an outreach ministry of this congregation, who are trying to be patient as we wait for our refugee family in Lebanon to receive their final clearances. And then there’s all those things you are involved in, here at Church, or through other organizations, or with your neighbours, or in the interactions of daily life, that do the hard work of supporting folks who might not experience much welcoming in their lives. Those things are to be celebrated, and each one puts us into a circle of giving and receiving love, a place where we, in essence, “minister to angels and are ministered to by angels.”

But the things we are doing also open our eyes to the things we could do, or have just started to do. I wonder, for example, if it is time for us to take the next steps towards really opening the doors to the LGBTQ community in the Bow Valley by taking another look at the “affirming” process of the United Church of Canada. We have started processes that acknowledges that the spiritual yearnings of the youth, young adults, children and families of the Bow Valley do matter to us, and we need to develop (and fund) intentional ways to hear those yearnings and act on them. And sometime soon, the shortage of emergency shelter space in the Bow Valley will need to be addressed, and I have no doubt that we as a congregation, and many of you as individuals, will be part of that discussion.

What we do today and tomorrow, what our forebears in this congregation were about 20 and 60 and 125 years ago, are part of a continuous process that reaches all the way back to the early Church that was being addressed by the book of Hebrews. Australian theologian William Loader, while acknowledging the danger of those early days of Christianity, has this to say about our scripture:

"These few verses [from Hebrews 13] offer us snippets of what Christian community meant. It wasn't a holy huddle of worshippers scared for their lives and totally obsessed with religious rituals. It was a community which expressed and shared love and in that context praised God - because God is a God who reaches out in love and compassion."

And with that view of what it was like “back then”, it really does come full circle. The Christ who spoke to disciples of the power of love, and inspired those early faith communities to express that costly love, is the same Christ whose love speaks to us and through us today. Hospitality is quite a soft and gentle word but it describes something that is powerful and tenacious and, at times, difficult. We, like the early Church, are called to stretch ourselves, to surprise ourselves by how fully we can welcome others in the name of Christ. May we, with Christ, be strengthened by love and be living expressions of love today, and tomorrow, and always. Amen.

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See also:

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Pohl, Christine D. “Building a Place for Hospitality” – an exploration of Hebrews 13 and current day implications. <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53383.pdf>

Appendix: an excerpt from the lyrics of *Angels Among Us*. © 1993, Don Goodman and Becky Hobbs

When life held troubled times And had me down on my knees
 There's always been someone To come along and comfort me
 A kind word from a stranger To lend a helping hand
 A phone call from a friend Just to say I understand
 Now ain't it kind of funny At the dark end of the road
 Someone lights the way with just a single ray of hope.

CHORUS

*Oh, I believe there are Angels Among Us, Sent down to us from somewhere up above.
 They come to you and me in our darkest hours To show us how to live
 To teach us how to give To guide us with a light of love.*