

“Angels Unawares”

A Sermon from the Front Pew
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 14th, 2020
Genesis 18, Hebrews 13:1-2
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Have you ever noticed that we treat famous people famously? We are polite. We speak up. If they were to ask us for something, we gladly do it.

But what about strangers who happen to be V.I.P.'s but we just don't know it?

Our life is filled with these strangers. And they each are “famous” to somebody. Here are a few, what I'll call, composite stories:

--- A girl in my neighborhood is getting ready to turn five-years-old; she will be older than she ever has been. As her birthday approaches in July, she's feeling on top of the world. She's famous and everybody in the neighborhood should come over and give her a high-five.

--- That lady in the grocery line got news early today that her son was killed in Afghanistan. In three days at a graveside, a young lieutenant will give her a smartly folded American flag. A preacher like me will say a few words.

She didn't know what to do with this news, so she decided to stock the freezer. Ever since mid-morning she's been wandering aisles, eyeing bargains. Peas are on sale. Lasagna. Eggo waffles. She's famous but no one will offer to carry her groceries to the car.

--- The man at the beauty salon just got a raise. The guy in the chair next to him was laid off after 38 years in the same company. The lady at the end of the row admiring her new coloring job in the mirror, has been cancer free for five years. Today.

Famous people, to use those words loosely, are everywhere. And while we ought not hound them for autographs, we should treat them with respect and compassion.

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In the middle of an afternoon one day, Abraham and Sarah were pondering what to have for dinner when along came three strangers. Abraham poured on the hospitality. These guys weren't famous people as far as Abraham knew; they were just people passing through. Abraham offers them more than water and shade. A calf is made ready, cakes are prepared, curds and milk are shared.

We know, of course, that these three are messengers from God. Abraham didn't know that, though, when he got out the best china and offered them the cream of his crop.

This text from Genesis has become a reminder that this is how we are to treat others, especially the stranger. In somebody's world, everyone we meet is famous, beloved. So, everyone deserves a measure of hospitality. The writer of Hebrews defines this hospitality as *mutual love*. “Let mutual love continue. 2Do not

neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (NRSV).¹

Each of us, created in God’s image, is the apple of God’s eye.

Each of us is famous to God. Each of us deserves to be treated well, to be shown hospitality, to be delighted in.

* * *

My father was taking me for granted one day---as fathers are wont to do. One day he wasn’t paying me the proper attention that somebody famous ought to get. We were on the seawall at Fort Monroe. To our left was the grassy field and the bandstand where the Army Continental band was cooking with Glenn Miller and Duke Ellington. To our right was the mouth of the Hampton Roads Harbor. It was summer. Behind us the sun was setting over Newport News Point, melting into the big shipyard cranes. Ahead of us the bay was green and cool and endless. Ships were making their way one by one into the harbor, the band was playing, and I kept asking Dad to race me down that wide seawall.

Why wouldn’t he give me to time of day?

I kept bugging him.

He agreed, at last, to take me for a walk while my mom and hundreds of others sat on picnic blankets on the grass listening to the music. He was willing to walk, but I wanted to run. I wanted to run. I wanted to race.

If I were a movie star or the president, he would have done it. *But I was just his son.*

I still remember saying, “Come on, Dad. Come on.” I still remember saying “Why not, why not?”

Then, an amazing thing happened. To this day I can hardly believe it.

Completely without warning, he took off running down that seawall. I was so shocked that it took me a few seconds to realize I was getting what I wanted, I was getting a race, and I had better start running or he’d be all the way down to Dog Beach before I ran a step.

So, I started running. And I poured it on. But no matter how hard I ran, the distance between my Dad and me was widening. He was running like a track star and I couldn’t believe it, so I churned my legs faster and faster but it still wasn’t enough. I was too slow, *way* too slow. And he was as fast as, well, as fast as an action hero.

He was in street shoes and sparks began to fly from the bottoms of his shoes when they’d scuff the concrete. First there were sparks, then blazing stripes of flame. He ran so fast that it created a great wind. Waves whipped up in the harbor. Trees started bending back and forth. Ships dropped anchor against the impossible head wind created by my Old Man’s bionic running.

He was a dot at the end of seawall, disappearing behind the redoubts built by Robert E. Lee before he became a confederate turncoat. My Dad was gone and I had been beat, defeated, *smoked* in that race that I wanted so badly.

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¹ “Be not forgetful,” he wrote, “to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (KJV).

I was nine or ten. And he was a grown man who stood about seven feet tall with winged feet. All I could do was stand there breathless and watch my Dad going, going, gone.

Even though I was beat, I was glad. I was glad because I knew that I was loved. Somebody treated me like I was a famous. I was beat, and glad, and a winner even though I came in last place. Dead last.

That's how you feel when people notice you. Sometimes all it takes are a few words, "How's it goin'?" Sometimes all it takes is carrying a sad mother's groceries to the trunk of her car in the grocery store parking lot. Sometimes all you have to do is kneel down on one knee and give an 5-year-old girl a high five.

And we never know.

By showing hospitality to a stranger, we might have entertained an angel without knowing it. Or, by God's grace, for a moment, we might have been an angel.

AMEN.

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Genesis 18:1-15 1The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

9They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Hebrews 13:1-2 1 Let brotherly love continue. 2 Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares . . .