

“Angels Unawares”

Genesis 18:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Matt Matthews

I'm holding a pledge card in my hand. And with it I endeavor to change the world.^[1]

In our text today three angels visit Abraham, but Abraham just thinks it's three strangers passing through. The writer of Hebrews, remembering this story from Genesis, would one day write, "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Abraham does what the custom expected him to do: he made a fuss over his visitors.^[2] The King James Version puts it this way: Abraham said, "And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts."

This text begs us ask this question: do we practice hospitality like that? We might treat our friends like kings. As my dad used to say, for our friends we'll "pull out all the stops" and "put out a real good spread." But Abraham shows hospitality to the stranger.^[3] Our culture teaches us to be wary of the stranger—even to fear the stranger. Any kid in middle school will tell you: kids who look different get treated differently.

Rev. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah spoke with pride about his mother at the BIG TENT Conference this August in Baltimore. He grew up in Baltimore. His mother worked all day serving food at a downtown kiosk. She went directly from her day job to her night job at the nursing home where she worked until early morning. She'd come home, fix breakfast for her five kids, sleep, then go back to work later that same morning. To help these kids through their childhood, she qualified for and received food stamps. As the young Soong-Chan got interested in politics—before he went to Columbia University and Harvard—he was stung to learn that national politicians called his mother a "Welfare Queen."

All of his siblings "turned out" just fine. This is due, in part, to the government assistance his mother got which helped her put food on the table. But he thinks his and his siblings' success was due, mainly, to the fact that his mother prayed for her kids every day. On cracked knees and hardwood floors, his faithful mom knelt and prayed every day.

Thank goodness Soong-Chan Rah's mom got Sundays off. Do you know how she spent her day off? She went to church, of course, where she cooked for the congregation, making a fuss over both friends and over strangers who had come to her church to find a little peace and encouragement. It didn't matter who they were, they were welcomed and they were well-fed.

Her brother was Abraham from the Old Testament book of Genesis. She learned about hospitality from him. Because she was a stranger to many people, she was mindful of how strangers are often ignored, marginalized, or feared. And she made it a point to welcome the stranger in—with open arms and a hot meal.

Thank God for Abraham. *If you cross my line of sight, if I don't recognize you, if you wear the clothing of a stranger, if your license plate is from out of town, if you have an accent... welcome. Come sit under the shade with me. You look hungry. Let me feed you.*

I give money to my church because, with you, this is the kind of welcoming place I'd like to build. I want to be part of a place where we make a fuss over one another and where strangers mingle with best friends.

My pledge card is a reminder to me that I'm called to kill the fatted calf. I'm called to make cakes, to pull out extra chairs and set them under the shade trees. Needless to say, this costs money. In order to welcome

people lavishly into our church home, we have to keep up the place. It takes time and energy and money to offer learning opportunities, music that soothes the soul, space to grow and to question and to serve. *Come on*, we say. *You are welcome here. You look tired. Sit down and I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts.* It costs money to do that.

But it's worth is, isn't it? Some years ago, you welcomed a stranger named Bob Nutt into this church. Did anyone have an idea where that would lead?^[4] Did we have any idea how richly God would bless us?

God, through the likes of Abraham and Jesus, has schooled us to bear hospitality to all-comers as we provide a safe harbor from life's storms at a place called First Presbyterian Church Champaign. I want to be a part of spreading out this banquet of love in God's name at this church.

This little card reminds me of that. With this little card, I aim the change the world.

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But there's a but . . .

But my contribution is small. It doesn't really matter. God will use other people; but God won't use me. God leans on people who are more faithful, but God would be embarrassed by my paltry contribution. You might killed the fatted calf, but all I can offer is a bowl of cereal with skim milk.

I suppose that's what Sarah thought. Sarah overheard them when the angels told Abraham that when they stopped by in the next year, Sarah would have a child. She laughed. ***But! I'm waxed old and stricken with age. I have nothing left to give. God can't use me; I'm all used up.***

God's answer to Sarah is God's answer to us: *Is anything too difficult for me? I can use you. I will use you. I want to make a fuss over you; and I want you to make a fuss over others. Let my grace give you courage. Open yourself to my sovereign love and power. See what good I can and will do through you and your kin. Don't underestimate my power. I'm calling you and equipping you to be agents of my grace in this world. Live boldly. Live generously. Set the table. Make ready the feast. We'll sit awhile in the shade. Trust me.*

In a year, that old, doubting, useless woman and her worn out husband had a son.

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Abraham shared hospitality to strangers who turned out to be angels. The card reminds to follow Abraham's lead. With your help, I plan to do just that.

I'm holding a pledge card in my hand. And with it I endeavor to welcome and thereby to change the world.

^[1] Have you ever been made a fuss over? If you go to the Biltmore House to tour it, the staff does a pretty good job of welcoming in the three- to six-thousand daily visitors in. But imagine coming to that mansion as a guest of George Vanderbilt, who build the place in the late 1800s. I imagine the staff would make a real fuss over you. Exquisite dinners, drinks, live music, couches by the roaring fires in the fireplace, strolls through flowered gardens. At the Biltmore back in the day, you'd never get lukewarm coffee in the morning or a pancake with fake maple syrup served on a flimsy styrofoam plate with a spork.

^[2] It was typical in the days of the Greeks that a meritorious host would feed, house, bathe, and clothe their guests. It was common that when the guests departed, the host would equip the guest with provisions and then escort them out of the region.

^[3] The Greek term for **hospitality** (xenia) is closely linked to the Greek term for **stranger** (xenos). The English word xenophobia means 'fear of the stranger.'

^[4] Disciples in the early church relied on the hospitality of others to spread the Gospel. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, welcomed Peter. Ananias welcomed Saul. Gracious hospitality was shown to Paul at Derbe and Lystra. Ico'nium, through the region of Phry'gia and Galatia, and Tro'as. Paul found welcome in Macedo'nia Sam'othrace, Ne-ap'olis, and Philip'pi. Lydia welcomed these strangers to Thyati'ra.

