

Sermon for Sunday, September 1, 2013 Hebrews 13:1-8. 15-16 "Risk It"

What does hospitality look like? In his letter to the Hebrews, St. Paul advises us to offer hospitality to strangers, because in doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it.

It's a romantic notion, and you can buy pretty plaques from the Signals catalog with that phrase carved on it, but do we really offer hospitality to strangers? What limits do we put on it? Do we consider offering hospitality to strangers who seem like us, like safe people, like the sort of people with whom we would have a continuing relationship after that first meeting?

Do we only offer hospitality when it doesn't put us at risk?

Is that what Paul is talking about?

He is referring, as you may be aware, to the time that Abraham and Sarah offered desert hospitality to three strangers as the patriarch sat beneath the oaks at Mamre. But he is also doing something more.

Look at the other things that Paul exhorts us to do: visit prisoners as if you yourself were a prisoner. Remember those who are being tortured as if you yourself were being tortured. Respect marital relationships. Don't be consumed with the love of money or things. In other words, put other people's needs ahead of your own wants.

And all of these virtuous things that Paul tells us we should do flow from the first virtue he cites, that of hospitality.

After all, if you are truly hospitable, you are more concerned with your guest's well being than your own.

That word "hospitable" is an interesting word. It derives from the Latin word "hospes," meaning "guest," and that word "hospes" generated the word "hostis" meaning stranger, or even an enemy stranger, as in the English word "hostile." So an early meaning of the word hospitality has something to do with welcoming an enemy stranger as a guest. But Paul is writing in Greek, and he uses a slightly different word, φιλοξενία. The first part, filox, is "friend." It's even a little more than a friend, it's a beloved friend. Okay, that makes sense. If you're offering hospitality to somebody, it's normal that you are caring for and welcoming a friend. It's the second part of the word that throws us for a loop. That part is xenia, which is the root for the English word xenophobia, or fear of strangers. Xenia means stranger, and could even be viewed as a frightening or threatening stranger. So this Greek word is a little paradoxical and challenging – it seems to be about treating strangers, even scary ones, as friends.

Now the flow from the statement about hospitality to caring about others in such a way that we might even put ourselves at risk, visiting prisoners, caring for those who are tortured, makes sense.

So Paul wants us to be hospitable in a way that exceeds garden-variety welcoming. He wants us to take a risk in our hospitality. We might encounter angels, we might encounter devils. We don't know until afterwards, if at all. It is sometimes scary. But it is what we are supposed to do.

Another Paul, an African hotel manager named Paul Rusesebagina, lived that kind of high-risk hospitality during the Rwandan genocide. He knew in the midst of the conflict that he was at risk, because he was in a mixed marriage. He was Hutu and his wife was Tutsi, and these two tribal groups were in conflict. As the violence escalates, Paul brings his neighbors, all Tutsis, into the hotel to hide

them, to try and protect them from the anti-Tutsi forces. He must maintain the façade of a luxury hotel to keep the secret of his hidden guests. He blackmails the Hutu general to keep his people safe, and eventually Paul and the other refugees in the hotel are evacuated, barely escaping with their lives. Paul is credited with having saved over 1200 Tutsis.

That's high-risk hospitality.

A few days ago, a troubled man walked into an elementary school. He was carrying an AK47 and it was clear that he intended to use it, since he had already shot the gun a few times.

Would you welcome him? Would you offer him some hospitality? Not very likely, right?

But someone did. A woman named Antoinette Tuff, a receptionist at the school – her very job title implies that she is to receive people and offer them hospitality – did precisely that. She started talking to him.

He was by his own admission mentally unstable. He felt he had nothing to live for. And he was going to go out in dramatic fashion, causing mayhem and committing suicide by police officer, making them kill him. She had the 911 dispatcher on the phone while she was in conversation with the man.

She told him of some of her own troubles in life and slowly, slowly encouraged him to give himself up. She helped him plan how he would put down the gun and empty his pockets. She offered to walk out with him when he gave himself up. And she said something more: "It's going to be all right, sweetie," she told Hill at one point in the call. "I just want you to know I love you, though, OK? And I'm proud of you. That's a good thing that you're just giving up and don't worry about it. We all go through something in life."

That's high risk hospitality.

The kind of hospitality that Paul is talking about.

Most of us don't find ourselves in situations where we have to talk down a shooter, thank God. Most of us don't live in places where one tribe is trying to exterminate the other.

But I wonder if we could rise to the challenge in a less dramatic way.

I wonder if we would have offered hospitality to the Freedom Riders in the 1960s. I wonder if we would offer a cold drink of water to someone who knocks on our door trying to sell us something we don't want, something that looks like it fell off a truck, as the saying goes. I wonder if we could enter into a conversation and share a cup of coffee with someone who believes things that we believe are just crazy, or who believes that we think things that are crazy.

Can we risk that hospitality? As I said before, we might encounter angels, we might encounter devils. We don't know until afterwards, if at all. It is sometimes scary, but it is what we are supposed to do. Risk it.

Amen.