

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/29/2010, Pentecost 14C  
Proverbs 25:6-7a, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:1-14  
Christian Hospitality

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:2, KJV)

I am quite proud these days of Rev. Dr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson. She grew up among us, among many of the clergy of the Lutheran church here in America. She is the daughter of theologian Rev. Dr. Paul Hinlicky, Professor of Theology at Roanoke College, Roanoke, Virginia, which is one of our Lutheran colleges. I have known Paul since Seminary days. Later Sarah was an intern at the Institute for Religion and Public Life here in the city, working with Fr. Richard John Neuhaus and our own Davida Goldman. Later still, she became senior editor of *Lutheran Forum*, and so, to some degree, she reports to me and to the other directors of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, which publishes that fine journal of theology. And most recently, she brought a little bit of fame to the Lutheran church here in America by way of her opinion piece in last week's edition of the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>1</sup>

Her article is called "A Thousand Miles in the Footsteps of Martin Luther." She starts off noting an important historical anniversary for us Lutherans seven years down the road: October 31, 2017 will be the five hundredth anniversary of Luther posting the *Ninety-Five Theses*, which is considered the official beginning date of the Lutheran Reformation.

But Sarah draws attention to another five-hundredth anniversary, one that begins now: the anniversary of Martin Luther's pilgrimage from the Augustinian priory in Erfurt Germany to Rome. It was a thousand-mile trek through southern Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and half of Italy. In celebration of Luther's journey, Sarah and her husband, Andrew, are following in his footsteps. She is posting a blog, called *hereiwalk.org*<sup>2</sup>, so that people can follow the journey that way or on *Facebook*.

I might talk about Luther's pilgrimage to Rome in a Reformation sermon someday.<sup>3</sup> But not now. Now I simply want to point out that to be a traveler on earth means that from time to time, you could sure use some hospitality. Sarah points out that she and Andrew have an advantage over Luther in that they have orthopedically correct shoes and waterproof synthetic fabrics. They figure they

---

<sup>1</sup>[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704868604575433283501270518.html?mod=WSJ\\_Opinion\\_LEFTTopOpinion](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704868604575433283501270518.html?mod=WSJ_Opinion_LEFTTopOpinion)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hereiwalk.org/>

<sup>3</sup> It turned out to be a disheartening trip for the pious young monk.

will trek fifteen-to-twenty miles a day in their correct shoes and waterproof fabrics. Luther probably averaged a bit more than that, maybe twenty-six miles a day. He did not have the modern clothing apparel that Sarah and Andrew had, but he had one big advantage over them: the hospitality of the Augustinian and other monasteries along the way. He was probably welcomed into a monastery nearly every night, while Sarah and Andrew will be camping out a lot, especially in the northern half of their trip where there are only a few pilgrim hostels.

Our text speaks of “entertaining angels”

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:2, KJV)

Indeed, you might end up entertaining Martin Luther unawares, which would be really, really cool!

But then, again, you might not. And that’s the problem.

Early Christians, they say, were famous in Roman literature for their hospitality. Christian hospitality is even on occasion ridiculed as the cheapest form of travel. Just announce yourself as a Christian and you can get free room and board for a few days.<sup>4</sup>

But it can be an adventure to be so hospitable. Notice that our text does not speak of entertaining “friends” or “relatives” but “strangers.” “Be not forgetful to entertain *strangers*...” The text goes on to say that, perchance, those strangers are angels. But, alas, they might not be. They might be awful people. They might be dangerous. They might be rude. They might not want to go away.

This call to entertain “strangers” is one part of a larger spiritual theme. Jesus directs love toward the “neighbor”:

<sup>35</sup>Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, <sup>36</sup>Master, which is the great commandment in the law? <sup>37</sup>Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the first and great commandment. <sup>39</sup>And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love *thy neighbour* as thyself. <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-40, KJV)

The problem here is that “thy neighbor” is *refractory*, to use the good word of my old friend Professor David Yeago. Yes, what sometimes ails the neighbor is that he or she is refractory: obstinately resistant to authority or control. Unruly! His own person, her own person. To love the neighbor means that you might have to love someone who is quite different from you and means to remain so.

Jesus spells this out to the summit when speaking of our “enemy.” After all, our neighbor might also be our enemy. If so, Jesus teaches that his or her enmity does

---

<sup>4</sup>Lewis R. Donelson, *The Lectionary Commentary on The Epistles*, page 519.

not disqualify that one from our duty of love. It is the teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount:

<sup>43</sup>Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour , and hate thine enemy. <sup>44</sup>But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; <sup>45</sup>That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43-45, KJV)

Not only that, not only does Jesus teach love for the refractory neighbor, but he lived that way. In fact, his whole life can be thought of as hospitality to a fallen world.

We can be very glad that Jesus was not like those who rushed to get the seats of honor at the marriage feast. Indeed, if Jesus had sought honor, he could have simply stayed in heaven, where he was honored and adored by all the heavenly host. But, for our salvation, he was willing to leave his seat of glory at the right hand of the Father and to descend into a very lowly world compared to what he had left behind. And so, St. Paul sings of the divine condescension of our Lord:

<sup>5</sup>Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8, RSV)

In this way, Jesus entertained strangers, in hopes that he could make angels of some of them, of you, and of me.

Recently I heard a sermon by one of the grand, old preachers of the Lutheran church: Rev. Dr. Frank C. Senn. His text was the trial of St. Stephen. Rev. Senn especially focused on the gentleness of Stephen in face of the judges who held his life in their hands. The text says that Stephen looked like an angel:

<sup>15</sup>And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15, KJV)

Stephen continued in this angel way even to the end, even when his opponents were stoning him. In beautiful imitation of our Lord, he forgave his persecutors, even as he was dying:

<sup>59</sup>And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup>And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, “Lord, do not

hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.  
(Acts 7:59-60, RSV)

And so it is that we have two words about angels: (1) be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for you might be entertaining *angels* thereby. And (2) even as Stephen faced those who had the power to condemn him to death, his face looked to them as the face of an *angel*.

This is the combination we should seek. We do not have perfect control over the nature of the stranger we entertain. That one might be an angel, but might not. However, we do have some control over how we conduct ourselves in face of the stranger, and we can strive to be more Christlike toward them, more angelic toward them.

Jesus calls us to be the light of the world. He calls us to help reflect *his* love for a refractory world, such that Christians become ten thousand little suns in this world.

Jesus himself brought a lovely fragrance to earth:

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:2, RSV)

And through our hospitality to strangers, we can help spread his fragrance in our city:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. (2 Corinthians 2:14, RSV)

There is a form of hospitality available to each of us: It is that we should open our hearts a bit to the strangers we encounter this week. It seems to me that one of the most practical ways to be a blessing in our city is to show hospitality to a lowly stranger -- if not all the time, then at least from time to time. Who knows? That lowly stranger on the city bus might turn out to be an angel when you pause and speak to that one. Even more wonderful, your pausing might help make that stranger into an angel, even a first step toward that one following our Saviour Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.