

14 Pentecost, Year C
Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14
August 29, 2010
St. Matthew's, Chesterfield

I have found that one of the most sacred places to be is in an assisted living or Alzheimer's care facility. But sacred places are not always the easiest places to be! Sacred places, where one comes in contact with the Holy, are challenging, can be fearful, and always involve change. Residents there have had to change everything about their lifestyle and they can be anxious and fearful. They can become apathetic or resistant.

It is true that the residents in these facilities have a hard time remembering things. In fact, some of them have such failing memories that they are there expressly for that reason, needing the constant care and attention of the staff to tend to basic daily needs. These children of God are in various stages of memory loss from the normal forgetfulness that comes with aging all the way across the spectrum to a complete unawareness of time and place.

The thing about going to visit a care facility is that I never know when I might come upon an angel to entertain... or ... when I might find myself being entertained by an angel! Because you see angels are everywhere....even in nursing homes....and they do not always wear white, or have wings and halos.

In both Hebrew and Greek the word for angel just as easily means messenger. Many times angels in scripture are seen in human form, without wings or halos. Because of my scientific background, and because I have never seen an angel with wings, I can more easily accept that an angel can be anyone who comes to us with a message from God. I come across angels all the time in the nursing home. They live there. And the two things that most of them still remember are their names and the faith that has been passed down to them.

Each month a group from St Matthew's goes to The Crossings at Ironbridge to offer a worship service for the residents. It would seem that we were the angels from St Matthew's bringing a word from God to these residents who might not remember. It would seem....

Many of the residents who attend worship *do* remember where they are and why they are there, and keep up with current events. They sing all their favorite hymns with joyful abandon, and are eager to share the ways their life experiences relate to the scripture for the day. They pray for one another and for us, and we share a Eucharistic meal together. They are so grateful to us for taking the time to come, but we go away from that sacred place blessed - blessed by their gifts and stories and joyful worship. But what about the ones who can *not* remember that we come each month with Word and bread and wine?

Last week I went walking through the halls to invite residents to come and worship with us. I approached a woman, whom I recognized, but I could not remember her name and

it was clear that she did not remember me. I invited her to worship but she declined, with a blank stare on her face. As I went farther down the hall, reading the names on the doors, I saw the woman's name. So I turned around and went back, determined to try again to connect with her. I said, "Hello Patricia". I cannot begin to describe to you the change that occurred in her expression when I spoke to her! She came alive with delight that someone had remembered her name. Again I invited her to come and worship with us and this time she responded to me. She asked me what church we were from and I told her we were Episcopalian, but that anyone was welcome. She then shared with me that she was a Baptist. I told her that I remembered when she had moved in two summers ago and that I had met her daughter. She then talked about her daughter with delight. This brief conversation made such a difference in this woman's appearance that it surprised me. It was an unanticipated gift! She let me know that she was not coming to worship that day, but would sit in the hall and listen to the hymns that she loved so much. I told her that it would be just fine for her to worship in the hall and said goodbye. As I walked away, Patricia said, "Thank you for remembering my name!" At that moment I knew that I was the one who had been blessed - by an angel named Patricia, who knew her name and the hymns of her faith. She remembered.

In our epistle reading today, the community that is being addressed is having a hard time remembering. The author has spent 12 chapters reminding these Jewish Christians of their history together and with God. We have heard some of this salvation history the past three weeks in our lectionary readings, as the author reminds them, and us, of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, and of the mighty works of God as the Hebrew people traveled through the wilderness. This early Christian faith community was in crisis. They had waited so long and still Jesus had not returned, their leaders were coming and going, and they were under great external pressure as a result of their faith. There was apathy in the community because they were not remembering their past, and they faced an uncertain future. They were unable to recognize that they were in a sacred place, because so much change was making them anxious. They were not remembering who they were or whose they were, and the author helps them to remember what God has done, is doing, and will do.

As I thought about this passage all week, I was struck by many similarities between that Hebrew community and the community of St Matthew's. I know that I am anxious about changes ahead as I leave this place and begin studies at VTS. I think most of us can admit to some anxiety about the changes taking place here. Martha has retired. We have new clergy whom we love, but they are different than Martha! We are trying new ways of doing things; we have new Christian formation plans. There have been many changes and while we are all really good at remembering "the way we've always done it", we may not be remembering all that God has already done for us, and our anxiety prevents us from seeing what God is doing now. And ... we are half afraid to hope for what God might do in the future because we know it will mean more change ...and change is just so darned uncomfortable!

Just as I know there are angels in nursing homes, I know there are angels here. I have seen you! You take meals to one another, visit nursing homes, and feed the hungry. You

do not neglect to show hospitality here – it’s the reason I am here, welcomed so warmly the very first time I visited! You have helped me to grow, enduring with perseverance my first sermons, and my exhortations to sing in church. As angels here, you have made yourselves vulnerable, sharing your joys and sorrows, fears and hopes. These were sacred encounters and gifts from God. Because that is what hospitality is....a mutual exchange of unanticipated gifts.¹

Like the author of the Letter to the Hebrews I want to exhort you to remember what you already know. Remember your name...who you are and whose you are. Remember that you are part of the great salvation history that began with the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Remember the steadfast faith of the first members of St Matthew’s and the examples they have been and still are for you. Remember to let mutual love continue and do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing so you may be entertaining angels.

Thinking about the new experiences ahead as we discern God’s hopes for St Matthew’s means we *will* be entertaining angels. And while angels may bring change, and even a little anxiety, they will also show us new things from God, and they will allow us to minister to them in ways that will make us vulnerable to an awareness of the Holy. Entertaining angels will help us to remember that, no matter what is changing all around us, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Amen.

¹ Lane, William L., Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 47B. Word Books, Publisher. Dallas, TX. 1991. p. 511.