

June 11, 2017

Think for a moment of a time when you've been welcomed by strangers. Perhaps they offered you directions and encouragement, shelter from the wind and cold, a warm plate of supper. Perhaps they simply offered you an epigram of wisdom in passing or a question you couldn't easily shake off. Moments of hospitality by strangers are often moments we don't forget.

It's likely, though, our hosts may have gotten something out of the encounter as well. Perhaps they offered us something simply out of wanting to pay it forward. Perhaps we too left them with a story or a question to ponder. Both host and guest are very often agents of the sacred: angels, if you will.

Remember the story of Abraham sitting outside his tent when three strangers arrive? He washes their feet. Sarah makes cakes of finest grain. They kill a choice calf. They share news Sarah will bear a child. And she laughs as she overhears the conversation through the tent flap. It is not an easy laugh, but a laugh of disorientation, perhaps suspicion. Before leaving, one of these angels of God says, "I will surely return to you in due season." This one might have said, "You will remember me when you are cradling that little one in your arms." How often have the gifts or messages of strangers returned to us in due season? How often have our gifts or messages returned to our own hosts in due season?

Many moral philosophers of the last century talk of strangers throwing us off kilter, knocking us off center. It can be uncomfortable...disorienting...we may laugh with Sarah in suspicion. And, such throwing us off a bit is exactly their gift, their way of imparting a message of Holiness. It is our nature to routinize our seeing, our hearing, our experiencing. It is our way of conserving our energy and predicting what's next. Yet, being knocked off kilter is often the very way we experience God again. It is revelation of a deeper connection to the world, a new way of seeing sacred and each other: The very thing we need for our own transformation. "I will surely return to you in due season."

There's no question hosting people, hosting strangers, can be annoying, hard work, sometimes even a bit dangerous. I'll tell you honestly, one of my pet peeves after hosting a group other than our church is walking into one of our restrooms next to my office with the door flung open, the automatic fan and light running, sucking up our the hallway's heat or cooling, and wads of paper towels strewn across the floor. I try to take a long, deep breath, and then remind myself, well it is sure better than this space being empty, heated or cooled for nobody. And who knows what happened here for that person in this space, the one who simply could not find the wastebasket.

Elijah comes to the widow at Zarephath, who could barely hold her head up, so weak from hunger, and asks her to make him a cake of meal from the very little she has left. When she

does, the flask of oil and the jar of meal doesn't run out. Even afterward, her son stricken with deadly illness, is revived by the very one who bawdily comes asking for her last morsel of nourishment.

Naaman, the great foreign general of Aram, is covered with leprosy. He's asked by his captured servant girl to come encounter the wild-haired, peculiar Israelite prophet Elisha. Naaman throws a tantrum when he is asked by the prophet to go wash in the filthy, unimpressive Jordan River. He'd much rather wash in his home rivers of Damascus. When he swallows his pride and does what he's asked, he is washed free of the disease.

"I will surely return to you in due season."

Perhaps you read this week about the struggling veteran who was sentenced here in Forsyth County. His partner had a restraining order filed against him. He came to her home anyway and sat in her garage threatening to kill himself. When officers approached, he pointed the gun at one of them and the officer, following protocol, shot the man in the leg.

This veteran, living with the horrors of war, since his injury, has finally received the mental health support he has needed and is on a path of awakening.

In court this week, he thanked the officer who shot him. "I'm glad you shot me," he said. "I may never walk again but I'm now ten times the man I was before you shot me."

"I will surely return to you in due season."

You see, we do not open our church, improve our building, find ways to come alongside undocumented neighbors, come to awareness of our privilege in relationship with others because we are nice, or good, or even because it's our duty as people of faith.

We strive to invest resources in assuring access and welcome because it is an investment in our own transformation as a congregation and as individual members in this community of faith. These encounters – even when we get annoyed, even when we laugh in suspicion, even when we might be put a little at risk – these encounters bring life – change our worship of God. They don't allow us to routinize our praise, but infuse our celebration of Holiness with many returns on our investment in due season.

We don't do this because we are politically correct or to stick it to so and so. We seek to craft a space of welcome because it stretches our understanding of the very sacred texts we read. It re-centers us in these stories, just as it re-centers us in our own life stories and the way we prioritize and decide our places in the world.

We do this because we are all on a sojourn, joining the story that most often begins, “Once we were slaves in Egypt...” Ours may be a sojourn of rediscovering what’s important, or with a new medical diagnosis, a journey of grief and longing, or re-healing from old hurts and disappointments. Wherever we are on life’s journey, when we seek to entertain strangers, we discover anew God’s abiding and joyful welcome of us right where we are.

“The stranger before departing said, “I will surely return to you in due season.”