

“Entertaining Angels”
The Rev. Jennifer Daly
Sunday, July 2, 2023
Chapel of St. James the Fisherman
Proper 8A: Genesis 22:1–14, Psalm 13, Romans 6:12–23, Matthew 10:40–42



Photo by Tracey Lind, Wellfleet, 2021

Thank you so much for having me here today. It is a little intimidating to be up here as my admiration for Tracy’s preaching is so immense—the way she combines a love for the light and the water here with a reminder of the eyes of Jesus, which see not disability or imperfection but rather our magic and lostness and yearnings—but I will do my best.

When I was 25, I was hired to work at Nativity Prep, a Jesuit middle school in Boston that took under-resourced boys and gave them a 12-hour day—three meals, rigorous curriculum, competitive sports, strong teaching—and love, and God. I am privileged to still know a number of those young men and many, many of them are ridiculously successful and strong. That school set me on the path for my life work, but perhaps I was most influenced by my supervisor, a brooding, loving, sarcastic Catholic priest named Al Hicks. Father Hicks had a few things he said all the time: “Thank you,” “He’s a real wise guy,” “Unless God builds a house” (meaning God better be the backbone of our endeavor or it would be worth nothing), and “Welcome the stranger.” He quoted the passage from

Hebrews often, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

It was the first thing I thought of when I read the passage for today, in which Jesus sends out the 12 disciples. He gives them advice about what to wear and what to carry earlier in the chapter, but in today’s reading, he says that the people who welcome him will be welcoming Jesus, will be welcoming God.

Those of us gathered here are followers of Jesus, are his disciples. As such, we are called to go out and share the good news of the kingdom. But the question of today seems to me a different one. The reading is asking us to question ourselves—if a disciple of Jesus comes to our door, are we recognizing them? Are we welcoming them? Are we giving them glasses of water? Now let’s be clear that we know nothing about being welcoming compared to those early Jewish people and early Christians. We do not welcome strangers to our homes and wash their feet, and feed them, really ever. We do not hold all things in common or walk two miles with someone who asks us to walk one. We live in a highly individualized, phone-centered, all-about-me universe where creature comforts and getting our exercise and food groups and vacations are the priority, so suffice it to say that we understand almost nothing about being welcoming—and I’m quite sure it does keep us from meeting angels unaware.

But at its minimum I think Jesus’s admonishment to be welcoming means we are supposed to keep our hearts open. We walk around huddled, with our arms crossed, which is so very different from the crucifixion position that Jesus adopts. He is sending off his disciples; he is asking them to be open. It is a terrifying time. There is rebellion in the air, the Roman occupiers are vicious, the Jewish brethren are finding the strength of the Jesus movement intolerable; and yet Jesus sends them out—sends us out—and his advice is to be welcoming, to be open.

Most of the time I am reminded about being welcoming by my students. Having been in schools for 40 years, I know that what makes a great school is committing to being a place where people’s best selves are welcomed and illuminated. For 40 years I have worked with children of poverty, who our country has largely abandoned to substandard housing and the power of the gun, and for over 40 years those children have educated me on keeping my heart open, on making myself truly available to the other.

For example, there was a young man in my math class this year with whom I struggled mightily. He is young and tough and brash. He is gorgeous, looks like an ad for the Gap, stuffs his massive curls in a ponytail, and flashes a smile that I find seductive even at 60. Let me be clear that the smile was NEVER flashed for me. Every day he shut down on a dime, over the smallest thing, and then he would refuse to work for a day or two. His moods and his defiance often left me enraged—and indeed sometimes provoked me to an annoyance which was downright unprofessional, and definitely un-Christian. In any case, I waited and worked for some small breakthrough, for just a glimpse of that moment you get when you teach, when you and a student realize you’re just two human beings trying to slog through together. But we never came close. And I could feel myself closing down, less and less concerned when he spent a class with his head down, no longer inclined to pat his shoulder or put a smiley face on largely neglected homework. But then, before All Saints

Day, I announced during the weekly Eucharist at my school, Epiphany, that in the church we used these days to honor people we loved who had died. I told the students they could write their name on a piece of paper, along with the name of someone they cared about who had died, and I would pray for them. I thought a few students would take me up on this. I was astonished when in fact scores of them did. It was a day after the announcement when Matt stopped me in the hall, “Hey Mrs. Daly,” he said, “if you can’t pronounce my uncle’s name when you’re praying for him, you can just say ‘Matt’s uncle’.”

“Ok,” I said, stammering, thinking, “HE put in a prayer request?” Trying to take it all in stride and stay casual, I said, “What is your uncle’s name?”

“Diego,” he said.

“I think I can manage that pronunciation,” I replied. It was a gift. Indeed, when I was going through my prayer cards, every time I got to his, to Diego, I felt some surge of happiness—that I had been entrusted to pray for Diego, that maybe although this kid hated me as his math teacher, maybe I was still able, albeit improbably, to bring him a little bit of God. That maybe he was doing a better job of keeping his heart open than I was. And that openness—it stayed with me. My heart swung back open, I could feel it, and for the rest of the year I could see how depressed and alone and yet determined he was. And I was able to love him and to hope for him—which was no small thing.

In April, we did foot washing at Epiphany, during our weekly church service. I did a full court press, really pushed kids to come up and get their feet washed, but pretty much no one came forward. But then David walked up. He is a big kid, complicated, impulsive. The kind of kid who has to clap back at someone who says something small. The kind of kid who sometimes makes terrible decisions—always trying to establish his place in things. The kind of kid with a smile that melts you and a real kindness impossible to overlook. Anyway... he comes up and sits in the chair. He really wants to be there, but he is also mortified. He keeps shaking his head and saying, “Damn” and covering his face, like “What are we doing here?” And then he says, “Can you just wash one foot?” And I say sure—not at all sure what that means theologically, but there is no time to quibble and the whole school is watching. I wash and dry his foot. We smile awkwardly. Then he says, “Should I do the other one?” I say “Sure, sure, might as well put both feet in.”

Taking off David’s sneakers and bathing his feet, the two of us smiling awkwardly at one another, I was so moved by his vulnerability. I was so touched by him hearing that something was available to him through that foot washing and by his yearning for that. Somehow the pull of it was even stronger than his teenage embarrassment. Somehow David’s heart was open enough to hear the call. And it left me wondering if mine heart is—I have been blessed most days of my life to know with absolute certainty that ours is a God with His hand open, offering peace and acceptance and real joy, if we can show up for it. I fail all the time. I fail to welcome the stranger, who is Christ. There is a documentary I love about Mother Teresa. In it, she picks up this child who is so distorted by deformity and illness that you cannot tell the human’s age or gender or diagnosis and she hugs them and turns to the camera, literally incandescent with feeling, and she says, “Aren’t they beautiful?” I flash to the saying attributed to her about loving Jesus in his most distressing disguise. Heart open.

And of course, I must pause to relate all of this to the story from the Old Testament - the terrible and distressing and I-wish-it-wasn't there story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for God. I hate this story, see it as the very root of so much of what's wrong with our culture, but I am taken by the thought that the way to look at it is not about Abraham proving to God the depth of his love, but about Abraham proving it to himself. God allows Abraham to see the depth of his love and obedience. Heart open.

Five years ago, I had a run in with cancer that resulted in two surgeries. I prayed a lot. It made me slow down. It made me very, very grateful for the earth, for the beauty of life, for the power of every day. There was one thing I hated: I hated when anyone said that beating cancer was all about attitude; that if people were brave enough, had enough of a fighter spirit, were optimistic enough, could manifest, they would survive. I didn't believe it scientifically, and I could not muster it—that attitude of positivity. And then I stumbled on this Jalaluddin Rumi poem:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

And it was so reassuring to me—the reminder that we need to welcome all parts of ourselves, all our emotions, all of our pain. That an essential part of being human is to welcome our very selves **and** one another **and** therefore God.

I believe that Jesus was the best manifestation of God: If you want to know me, watch this man; see how he loves, see how he spends time with outcasts and sinners, see how he told us we must welcome the disciples in order to welcome him. "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Amen.