

## ENTERTAINING ANGELS

Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

*Dear Friends, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

There was a fascinating story in Time magazine, sometime back, about Melissa Deal Forth, 40, a film maker in Atlanta. It was about the day her husband, Chris Deal, died. It was exactly one year after he had been diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. According to Melissa, the last months had been gruesome: treatments that could not save him, nights when they couldn't sleep. But Melissa was sleeping, soundly, at his hospital bedside on the morning of January 4<sup>th</sup>, when Chris managed, somehow, without being seen or heard, to maneuver himself, and his portable IV pole, around her, out of the room, and past the nurse's station, with its 360-degree view of the ward. All Melissa remembers, is being shaken awake at 3:00 a.m. by a frantic nurse who was saying something about not being able to find Chris. Well, at this news, Melissa hit the floor running. And, as she approached the elevator, she happened to glance toward the chapel, where she caught a glimpse of Chris, who was sitting with a man she had never seen before. Frightened and furious, she burst through the door, firing off questions, "Where have you been? Are you okay?" Chris just smiled. "It's fine," he told her, "I'm all right." His companion remained quiet, his eyes on the floor, as though not wanting to be noticed. He was tall, dressed rather like Chris usually did, in a flannel shirt, Levi's, and lace-up work boots -- although this young man's clothes were different, in that the entire wardrobe looked brand new -- as if they had just been taken off the shelf. Melissa went on to say, "There was no real age to him, no wrinkles, just this perfectly smooth and pale, white, white skin, and ice blue eyes. I mean I've never seen that color blue on any human before. They were more the blue like some of those Husky dogs have. I'll never forget the eyes!" Chris seemed to want to be left alone with this visitor, and, so, she, reluctantly, agreed to leave. When he came back to his room, she said, "He was lit up, just vibrant! He was also smiling -- I could see his big dimples -- I hadn't seen them in so long. He didn't have the air of a terminally ill, and a very weak man, anymore." "Who was that guy?" she asked. "You're not going to believe me," Chris said. "Yes, I will," she answered. "He was an angel," Chris said. "My guardian angel." Well, Melissa did believe him. "All I had to do was to look at him," she says now, "to know something extraordinary, something supernatural, had happened."

Later, she searched the hospital to find the man.

But, there was no one around, and the security guards hadn't seen anyone come or go.

She went on to say, that, "after the visit of that guardian angel, Chris told me his prayers had been answered."

"I worried, for a while, that he thought, perhaps, the angel had cured his cancer. I realize now it wasn't a cure, but it was the blessing the angel brought with him, by his visit with Chris. That angelic visit brought Chris a genuine peace of mind and heart."

Chris died two days later.

In the 11 years since Chris's death, Melissa says, "not a day has gone by, when she has not thought about that angel, and what he did for her husband. Chris' earthly life could not be saved, but the fear and pain were taken from him."

She goes on to say, "I know what I saw, and I know how it changed our lives. Never, never, never, will anyone be able to convince me that angels don't exist!"

I was delighted to read about Melissa's experience.

Although, I have never, personally, had an encounter with a supernatural being, I know that such things are possible, and I rejoice whenever I hear a report of such a happening.

Back in 1982, when I was serving a church in Beulah, ND, there was a young couple who were part of that congregation whose young son was afflicted with leukemia.

When we arrived to serve that congregation, that boy, probably four years old at the time, had already begun chemotherapy treatments, and had lost all his hair.

His parents, dutifully drove from Beulah, ND to Rochester, MN, on a regular basis, to enable their son, and only child at that time, to receive the treatments he needed.

But there came a time a change occurred.

The parents came, one day, to tell me the story of how their son had had an experience that seemed unbelievable, and almost too good to be true.

The boy said that one night an angel had entered his bedroom and held him on its lap, and spoke to him about his situation.

The angel told him not to worry, and to tell his parents not to worry, because God was going to heal the boy...

No one, at the time, knew quite what to believe -- but we all continued to pray, and hope for the best.

Then came that day, when the doctors indicated that the cancer had gone into remission. He is a grown man, now, and married.

And, everything which was promised, took place, just as the angel had promised, in his visit with that small boy.

For, you see, my friends, we do know that angels are an important part of the Biblical story. And, as early as the story of Abraham, we find angels speaking for God.

Angels announced our Lord's birth.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, people encountered angels -- intermediary beings between heaven and earth.

Many people, today, are comforted by the thought, that, in the words of the old spiritual, there are "angels watchin' over me."

The writer of Hebrews believed in angels.

And he said something interesting -- I like the way it is worded in one of the older translations:

*"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for, thereby, some have entertained angels unawares."*

Now there are a couple of ways of interpreting his words.

**In the most basic of ways, he was advocating simple hospitality to strangers: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers..."**

Hospitality to strangers is a cherished tradition in Middle Eastern countries.

There is an old legend that tells how Abraham pitched his great tent at a crossroad.

The flaps of that tent were lifted, on all four sides, so that he might discern the approach of any stranger, and hasten out to meet him.

Once, when Abraham ran out to offer his hospitality to three strangers, he discovered that they were more than just strangers, they were angels.

And, their visit was to bless Abraham with the news that he would someday be the father of many nations.

Had Abraham reacted in a hostile manner to his visitors, one could wonder if he would have received the blessing they bestowed on him.

Maybe that is the story the writer of Hebrews had in mind.

Hospitality.

Kindness to strangers.

It is certainly something of which we are in short supply in this modern world in which we now live.

We teach our children to be wary of strangers.

And, we are all, generally, suspicious of strangers.

But, hospitality.

What a sweet concept it is -- particularly when we are on the receiving end.

"If you've ever been the stranger," writes Billy D. Strayhorn, "or the new kid on the block, then you know that it's frightening and unpleasant. And we don't like frightening and unpleasant."

Who does?

It ties our stomachs into knots, and gives us nightmares.

It unsettles our lives.

If you have ever been a stranger, a newcomer, then you know how great it feels, to encounter any show of hospitality, no matter how small.

Jesus said, in Matthew's gospel, chapter 10 and verse 42: *"A cup of cold water given to a stranger in my name will not go unrewarded."*

You and I probably need to pray for the ability to be more hospitable to strangers.

How can we ever show the love of Jesus to the world, if we regard strangers with fear and distrust?

A while back, I was visiting with one of the senior members of a congregation I was serving as pastor, and she told me the story of how her parents became part of the congregation where I was now the pastor.

They had moved here from another location – I can't recall, now, whether it was from Kansas or Nebraska – but, where ever it had been, they had been part of a church there, and, of course, as they got settled, they wondered where they would attend worship.

It just so happened, that their new neighbors dropped by, and, in the course of their welcoming visit, they asked if the family might like to join them for worship at the church that they attended.

And, the neighbors, even took the invitation further, as they made a special point of stopping at the farm to retrieve them, so they wouldn't have to feel uncomfortable walking into the church, and feeling like strangers.

And, so they sat with the neighbor family who had invited them.

Now, what a difference it makes to be able enter into a new experience – not alone – but with someone you know who is beside you!

One of the things that made our transition to retirement a much smoother endeavor was that we didn't have to "shop around for a church," because we had already had some "sneak previews" when we attended Trinity Free Lutheran with Brian and Laura, and experienced enormous hospitality when Pastor Dan graciously consented to allow me to baptize my grandson, Sawyer.

We experienced, early on, the hospitality that you, as a congregation, warmly extended to us! During the years in which I pastored a congregation in Bismarck, I had the opportunity to greet a lot of people who were "checking out churches" in hopes of finding a church home.

We had a lot of visitors – some went elsewhere but some stayed with us.

I began to study what was unique about those people who started as visitors but ended up becoming members of our fellowship.

The difference between those who stayed with us, from those who had visited, and gone elsewhere, was that the ones who stayed, had, either, a family or friendship connection.

Someone they knew and trusted had invited them, and maybe even sat with them...

That simple fact made all the difference!

Offering hospitality isn't just being kind and neighborly, because, Jesus went even further than the writer of Hebrews, when He indicated, in Matthew's gospel, chapter 25 and verse, 40, when we help the stranger, we are, in fact, ministering to Him -- we, literally, are ministering to Christ.

In the Old Testament, there are many references to "the angel of the Lord..." and some commentators believe that "the angel of the Lord," was in actuality the preincarnate Christ. There is a "big theological word" used to describe these visual manifestations of God in the midst of His people – they are referred to as "theophanies."

On the surface, it would seem that the writer of Hebrews is telling us, simply, to be kind and hospitable to strangers.

But he, also, seems to be saying more than that.

**He is saying that some of these strangers may even be angels – or even "theophanies" and we may not be aware of it.**

Often, when God has wanted to bless me, he has brought someone new -- a stranger -- into my life.

I think of all the people we have met in the context of pastoral ministry, over the last 45 years. Every time we agreed to serve a church, we have met a host of people with whom we were not initially acquainted, but, we most certainly were, by the time we moved on...

I have met strangers in hospital waiting rooms.

I have met them as visitors to our church.

I met them when I was doing bi-vocational ministry and worked at the local grocery store.

I have met them as students and staff I've encountered while working as a substitute teacher with the school system.

I've discovered that there are angels everywhere!

One of the reasons that we ought always to be kind to strangers is that some of these strangers will bless us mightily.

As I look back over my life and of 45 years of ministry I feel a great deal of gratitude for the many people God has brought into our lives.

And, despite the fact that I am no longer serving as pastor of those many congregations, where I had been a pastor, these dear people continue to bless us in so many ways.

For, you see, my friends, angels come to us in many forms.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us by saying, *"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers!"*

That's an important message to an area of the country that is becoming increasingly multi-cultural.

Because, there is always a natural inclination to prefer being around people who are just like us...

When my paternal grandfather came to this country, from his home, in what was then known as Bohemia, and which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he came, initially, to the Spring Hill/Meier Grove, MN, in Stearns, County, because a number of people from his home country had already settled there.

And, a number of years, later, after he had migrated to Sargent County, ND, to homestead, when his first wife died, he returned to that village in Minnesota, where some of his own people still lived, and he secured the services of a young woman, to be a house-keeper, and to assist him, in raising his four, now, motherless, children.

That housekeeper soon became his wife, and ultimately, the mother of my father and my grandmother.

I tell that story, because it was so typical of the times...

People who came over from Europe tended to cluster together in settlements.

In some cases, they already knew each other, they spoke the same language, they ate the same types of foods, and, they had the same ways about them.

When I was pastoring in the Pelican Rapids, MN, area -- I came across Platt maps with the names, "Norwegian Grove or Swedish Grove."

They kept to their separate "groves" and did not mix.

My first pastorate was in Hawley, MN, which was predominantly settled by people from England, and, it was called a "Yeoville colony" -- but there was also a nearby community called Spring Prairie, and it had been settled by Germans...

I remember visiting with a friend, some time back, who was telling me of the time in the history of his community when it was unthinkable for Swedes to even mix with Norwegians let alone intermarry! But, through the grace of God, people discovered that they weren't so different after all -- and Norwegian girls began to marry Swedish boys...and Swedish girls began to marry Norwegian boys -- and, even the unthinkable happened, Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes began to marry Germans!

Although, at first, it was not well received...Sherry's family tells the story of when her maternal grandfather, who was Norwegian, brought home a bride who was Swedish, and, how she was shunned and ostracized, because she wasn't Norwegian, and she was considered, for many years, just an outsider -- these days, I've heard the term, "outlier" used to refer to people who come from a different culture.

But, you see, my friends, the call of Christ is to reach out to all people -- even those who are very unlike us. And, even more important, is, that we are to be sensitive to any person in need, whoever they may be, and regardless of their situation.

We are to be like the Master – reaching out to anyone who needs our help -- reaching out with understanding and compassion.

And, Christ tells us that when we do that, we will discover that many of these strangers will bring blessings into our lives.

You see, my friends, most of the time we'll never know whether the person we helped was, in reality, an angel in disguise...

Maybe it won't be the kind of angel Melissa Deal Forth met the night her husband died.

But maybe it will...

Some experiences come our way that are beyond our human comprehension, but they are not outside the realm of possibility of an angelic visitation, cloaked in human form...

Who knows but what we might have an angelic visit, or experience a theophany, but, regardless, my friends, there are flesh-and-blood angels who can bring good things into our lives if we will give them the opportunity.

And, offering kindness to strangers is one way in which we open ourselves and others to that opportunity.

When I was growing up in the home of my parents, in Wahpeton, ND, my mother, a loving and very giving person, often welcomed strangers who came to our door -- she rarely turned anyone away.

In fact, I remember the time when I was just six years old, and my oldest brother came home and told my mom about the younger sister of one of his friends...That sister had become pregnant out of wedlock and now had a little baby girl to take care of. But, because she was still so young herself, she wasn't able to offer proper care to this new baby. And, my brother begged my mother to assist this young mother by bringing that little baby into our home to properly care for her. My mother, who was already 44 by this time, and dad was 53 welcomed this little child into our home and raised her as if she was their own, and later adopted her. And, as a result, I have a sister I would otherwise not have had -- an angelic visitor into our lives who brought us tremendous joy. We would never have had the joy of this experience if my mother had said no -- and kept the door closed.

You never know, my friends, but this we do know...

*"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers...for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."*

*Let's pray: Lord, enable us to respond to those times when you send strangers our way, with the same kind of unlimited grace and unending mercy that you have so graciously extended to us. Help us to stay open to angelic visits throughout our earthly lives. And enable us to extend blessing to those you send our way. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who made it possible for us to enter Your house, O God. Amen.*