

May I listen to your voice, Lord. Holy Spirit, lead me to say words that send Good News to folks who need encouragement right now. Holy Spirit, may I speak humble words of gentle truth. Amen.

As I sat down to write this sermon, the AI program was ready and willing to do it for me. Kinda freaky, no?

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately depending upon your viewpoint, we are living in truly interesting times. How are you faring? How is your anxiety level? Are we at peace, or are we struggling for balance?

In today's scripture lesson, at the end of the book of Hebrews, the writer gives a closing exhortation, which is an emphatic urging, to a group of Christian Jews. Paraphrasing verse 2, the writer emphatically urges the Hebrews to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Hospitality was extremely important in Jewish culture. From a practical viewpoint, it was necessary because travel was so difficult. But it wasn't just a nice thing to do; it was considered a sacred act.

Are we under the same obligation today? In today's culture, I doubt many people would consider hospitality a sacred act. Do we? You might argue that things were different then, that traveling anywhere depended heavily on the grace of strangers. Today we can drive across the country and scarcely even interact with another human being. Think about it, you pay for gas at the pump, your hotel experience is as automated as is possible, drive-through food. But this is *my* travel experience, it's not the experience of the person living on the edge. The more marginalized one is, the more he or she depends on hospitality from strangers.

Remember the TV series "The Twilight Zone?" da da da da. Cue Rod Serling's voice: There is a place in New Mexico, where you enter another dimension: a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Friendly Zone". I'm talking about the road west of Silver City on Highway 180. You have to adapt your driving: your hand needs to be at the top of the steering wheel because everybody waves when they drive by. I don't know why, but there are zones like this all over the country, almost always in rural areas. Country people seem to know a little more about hospitality. Maybe there's a connection with the Jews' situation 2000 years ago.

Giving true hospitality can be uncomfortable or inconvenient for us. For me, I cope through avoidance. The truth is, I want to help, but I want no perceived risk to me. Hospitality seems to come naturally to some folks, but not me. The good news is that we don't need to have a

“unique gift” to practice hospitality, we can be confident that Holy Spirit will help us as we go. All Christians are expected to practice hospitality; it is a communal gift.

One time when I was a kid, my brother and I went backpacking with my dad down the West Fork of the Gila River. My brother was about 30 yards behind us on the trail, and he was complaining on and on about how bad the flies were. His constant whining was really getting on my nerves. At some point we stopped for a break and took off our packs. As my brother got closer to us, I saw this apocalyptic cloud of flies around him. You see, he was carrying some steaks in his pack for dinner that night, and they had bled all over the back of his pack. I learned two important lessons: A) You really never know what the other person is going through, and B) Always have someone else carry the steak. It seems to me that people who are good at hospitality understand that the other person’s life is a novel that they haven’t read.

Our scripture from Hebrews tells us that we might be giving hospitality to an angel without even knowing it. Hebrews was written to Christian Jews, who would recognize the implied reference to Abraham, Gideon, and Manoah. I went to the internet to check out peoples’ stories who believe they may have met angels. I wouldn’t exactly call this research; Just curious. I was pleasantly surprised and inspired. You should check it out for yourself. To me it sounded like most of these “angels” were probably ordinary people who had a connection with Holy Spirit. Gotta tell you, the idea that we could wind up entertaining an angel is beyond cool.

What do people need? Obviously, physical needs are the first level: thirst, hunger, shelter, warmth. Many of these physical needs are simple; an act as simple as giving directions can be true hospitality. One time I was parked alongside a mountain road in the Gila, waiting to meet my son, who was driving down from Albuquerque. I had just got there when a guy in a semi-truck pulled up and asked if this was the way to Chino Mines. I said, well you passed it about 10 miles back that way and this is the last place that you can turn your truck around before you have a long, steep, and curvy trip through the mountains, headed in the wrong direction. I didn’t even think a semi-truck could make it. If I had arrived a minute later, that poor driver would have been in a world of hurt. Later on, I thought, wow my son might have come around a corner face to face with a semi-truck jackknifed on a narrow turn. I did nothing heroic or dramatic; I just talked with the guy and happened to have some knowledge about the road. This story is amazing because it’s unremarkable. Holy Spirit’s at work all around us and we don’t even notice it. I’m convinced Holy Spirit put me there, although I didn’t realize it until a bit later. Holy Spirit is everything with hospitality, and that’s good news for those of us who aren’t good at it.

But what about people’s spiritual needs? Maybe the stranger also needs a place of rest if only for a little bit.

The late great R.C. Sproul talks about a characteristic that nearly every person on this planet shares, namely that of a “restlessness”, that shows itself as anxiety, or maybe a vague sense that something’s missing. It only goes away completely when we enter our eternal rest in the loving arms of Jesus.

When I heard R.C. talk about this sense of “restlessness”, I sat up and listened. I know exactly what he’s talking about. I marveled at his insight that we all share in this restlessness. Even the non-believer feels it – or more accurately, the non-believer feels it even more. I know, I was a non-believer once.

For the believer, isn’t there also a longing in us for a better way to live? Do we believe that some wounds that will only heal completely in heaven? Don’t we all hope to see our loved ones in heaven? The perfect forgiveness and acceptance. No tears. Even the Apostle Paul feels it, when he talks about his great longing in the first chapter of Phillipians. Listen to Paul’s words:

I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith ...

I was unsure what to do with my discomfort regarding hospitality, so I started looking at it another way, I’ll call it spiritual hospitality. What is preventing me from giving strangers a time of rest, even if for only a moment? Are we not given this promise in today’s scripture? Reading from verse 6:

So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?”

We can say with confidence the Lord is our helper. Confidence. Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom to know how to help, when to help, and what to say. Then it struck me. What kind of hospitality am I offering Holy Spirit as he dwells within me?

I used to travel quite a bit for work. One night my plane arrived very late into Huntsville, Alabama. Huntsville was smack dab in the middle of the bible belt, and you could hear some interesting preaching late at night on the radio. I turned on the rental car radio and tuned into the AM frequencies. The preacher with his southern drawl was telling us radio listeners to treat our bodies like temples or Holy Spirit would leave in disgust. Treating our bodies as temples is certainly biblically sound but the part about Holy Spirit leaving us in disgust is baloney. Jesus sent him to us and he resides in us. The phrase “our bodies are temples” made me think, though, what kind of hospitality do I provide Holy Spirit? What does Holy Spirit need from us?

Well, Holy Spirit doesn't need anything from us, he is God after all. But he does desire a relationship and wishes to shower us with grace. He wants us to ask for help. He will always help; why else does he live within us? What the Holy Spirit wants is to see us thrive in his grace. What does thriving look like?

When we are thriving in the Spirit, we are listening to that small voice. We embrace the unique gifts God gives us. There is also guidance for living that is common to us all. Such as hospitality. Giving hospitality to others is rooted in walking with Holy Spirit. The place to begin hospitality, and end, for that matter, is our relationship with Holy Spirit. The question about providing hospitality to Holy Spirit gets turned on its head, for he is the source of true, fulfilling hospitality.

Hospitality doesn't always work out the way we hoped for. But think about the times you got it right. Think about the gratitude in the other person's eyes. Think about the feeling of peace you had. Maybe it was just a little thing, like maybe you offered a kind word. Or maybe it was a big thing you did. That peace is real.

We have this marvelous promise given to us in today's Psalm, I'm reading from verse 4 using the NIV translation:

Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous. Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice.                      And that's God's promise. Amen.