

Blogging toward Sunday

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August 27, 2007

Along my office hallway a sign has been mysteriously posted: HOSPITALITY NOT HOSTILITY. Apart from the fact that I find capital letters extremely inhospitable, the sentiment seems apt, and leads me into thinking about Hebrews 13.

How often have I mistaken angels for strangers? At what point did Mary identify her intruder as Gabriel during the annunciation? (Gabriel is not recorded as introducing himself to Mary). And, if an angel is an emissary from God—in both Hebrew and Greek the term simply translates as messenger—do we need to identify the stranger as an angel, or is the message rather about recognizing and receiving a word of grace from God through the encounter?

Hebrews 13:1 focuses on mutual love. As if taking for granted that strangers (or angels) will offer love, it is readers who are here exhorted to show hospitality, to show love, to respond mutually. I feel my normal definition of a stranger—someone I don't know—being redefined. I already know that a stranger may turn out to be a gift. But here is a call for yet greater relational receptivity. A new definition is emerging: the stranger is anyone in whom I have yet to recognize God's gift.

Clearly the Pharisee with whom Jesus dines in Luke 14 is someone who identifies himself as God's gift. We may presume this man is well-versed in strategic entertaining and, I dare say, fund-raising: he normally invites those who in due time will bring a handsome return on his investment. Sounds like a kind of mutuality?

Jesus challenges him to invite those who can *never* repay: the crippled and the blind, after all, have permanent disabilities. Mutuality, instead of being a reciprocity of means and money, is re-focused on blessing, if he can only learn to see it. The irony is heavy: this Pharisee has offered hospitality to "the poor," to the stranger—in Jesus—but it appears he cannot recognize the gift of God.

Jesus also addresses the other side of hospitality in his parable: being the guest (Luke 14:7-11). We should not be presumptuous concerning our relative place among the guests; or, at least, we should presume to be at the bottom not the top. Put another way, we should play the stranger. If we are a gift of God, then it is a gift for the host to unwrap and acknowledge.

Our games of status are revealed. In Hebrews it is assumed, when it comes to hospitality, that I am the agent, the host, “the rich”: responsible for welcoming the stranger and encouraged to recognize their blessing. I can handle that: I have a house and considerable other resources from which I can offer warmth and welcome without need for any material return. But mutuality demands that I not simply play host; and of course it takes two to be strangers. Perhaps I need to “play” guest so as to enable the full mutual exchange? Isn’t this the somersault God made, when the creator of the universe and host of the heavenly banquet became guest at the Pharisee’s house for dinner?

I recall a student recounting the lessons of a CPE internship. “When it comes to pastoral care my aim has always been to bring some word from God to that person through the encounter—whether by reading scripture directly or through conversation or prayer. But this summer I’ve started approaching the pastoral visit totally differently. Now I arrive seeking the presence of God which is already there and seeking to identify something of God’s treasure in that person. Then I sit with them to pray or read scripture together. I don’t know how it works for them but I know it’s become a wonderful blessing for me. I used to worry I was inadequate; now I’m more often in awe.”