

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

6.14.26 - Pentecost 4

There were some triggering and tragic events in our news this week. A cross burning in a public park in Chicago. The verdict and sentencing at the end of the story of two 17-year olds at a track meet, one Black and one white, and a confrontation over who could be in the team's tent during a thunderstorm, and as a result a stabbing, and two families lives destroyed.

Who gets to be in the park. Who gets to be under the tent. These are the horrible stories of what happens when there is no welcome, no hospitality.

We hear a lot of stories of rejection and exclusion, even in our Bible. But this week our sacred texts are lifting up hospitality. The theme of hospitality jumped off the page for me, probably thanks in part to Cathy Glazer, who has been leading a group of hospitality and welcoming evangelists trying to make us all better at reaching out to people who come through our doors.

In the time of the ancestors and the time of Jesus, welcoming the stranger, showing hospitality, was a matter of honor. If you did not show proper welcome to a traveler or stranger, you brought shame on yourself and your whole family. Jesus invoking the names of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah refers to this sin. Sodom and Gomorrah is a story of people being violent to visitors, showing the opposite of hospitality, and because of that grave sin, God rains down fire and destroys the cities.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is giving instructions to the disciples for going out, proclaiming the good news, and being the good news by healing the sick and raising the dead. He tells the disciples to take nothing with them -- no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey. Why? Because in Jesus' culture, the disciples can expect to be greeted with hospitality, to be welcomed into people's homes and fed.

We see two disciples practicing this type of hospitality on the road to Emmaus, after Jesus' death. Jesus walks on the road beside them and teaches them, but they think he's just a stranger. When they get to their destination, they beg him to join them for a meal, and it is after this offering of hospitality that they recognize the risen Christ.

In our Old Testament reading today, Abraham does not know what good news the three men will bring him. He sees them near his tent, and urges them to stay. He hustles around with his wife and servants to get a special meal ready. It is simply the way things are done in Abraham's world.

And because of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah and their household, they get news of a miracle. Your wife Sarah will have a son, one of the strangers says. It is such incredible news for this elderly couple that could not conceive, that Sarah has to laugh.

This is what happens when we let strangers in. This is what happens when we open our tent. We hear miraculous news. We see the risen Jesus. We are healed. Things that were dead come to life.

St Martin's, you and I know, it's not easy to show hospitality. We as modern Americans, Episcopalians, we are used to being in our comfortable circles, to being individuals, to not sharing our stuff. It feels awkward getting to know new people, making conversation, letting someone new into our tent.

We can take heart from our scripture today. We can also remember the hospitality we were shown. Many of us at St Martin's have a story about a person who reached out to us when we were new, someone who helped us feel like we belonged. I know I have many such stories, including yesterday when there was a whole team of gardeners in the rectory garden on a hot day, pulling out weeds and uncovering the beautiful brickwork underneath. I have felt so welcomed and embraced in this community, and it has helped me to be a better priest for you.

Abraham shows us an example of giving hospitality. Jesus encourages the disciples to go out to receive hospitality, as travelers with nothing in their possession, relying entirely on their hosts. Jesus is telling the disciples to go out and be strangers.

We are a community that practices going out, whether to Face to Face Germantown or Guatemala. And when we go out of our comfort zone, especially when we go to places and spaces where we are not the majority, where we are the stranger, when we go to those places and accept hospitality from our hosts, we are changed. We are gifted and we are the gift at the same time.

When we let strangers in, we hear miraculous news. We see the risen Jesus. We are healed. Things that were dead come to life.

When we go out to be strangers, just as when we try to show hospitality, it can be scary. We can feel uncomfortable, exposed, lost without our bag. We may have to go to places where there is hurt, to a desecrated park in Chicago, to a courtroom full of grief and despair in San Francisco. We may have to go not only with no bag but with no answers, no special knowledge, no expertise, because it is not our house. We may have to just go and listen.

When we go out as strangers, it can be scary. And it can be more rewarding than we can imagine. When we welcome strangers, we hear miraculous news. We see the risen Jesus. We are healed. Things that were dead come to life.

When we go out to be strangers, bringing nothing, and especially going in humility and bringing no ego, we also hear miraculous news. We see the risen Jesus. We are healed. Things that were dead come to life. We know this, St Martin's because we have practiced it, and we have seen how we are changed and enriched by encounters with our neighbors.

But also. When we go out as strangers, bringing nothing and no ego, strangely enough we bring miraculous news. We are the risen Jesus. We heal others. We bring the dead to life. When we go out and let ourselves accept hospitality, we are doing what the angels did with Abraham, we are doing what the disciples were told to do by Jesus.

We may not know when we have been good news to others. We may not know that our words have landed, that our presence brought peace, that our listening awoke something that had been dead. All we can do is keep practicing hospitality, the giving and the receiving. All we can do is keep reaching out, and going out, feeding visitors and letting others feed us.

Many times, we will be confused about who is the stranger and who is the host. Many times, we will be unsure about who is being Jesus to who. Oh yes. That's because, we are both being Jesus to each other. Amen.