

Sermon: A Strange Love
Text: Hebrews 13:1-6
Date: October 22, 2017
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:2

If you were to survey ten “average Americans” -- whatever that might mean -- I suspect that at least nine of them would not know that hospitality is a core Christian virtue, a core Christian practice.

For that matter, I suspect all nine of them would be surprised to know that there are such thing as core Christian virtues, or core Christian practices -- beyond insisting that, for the next eight weeks, we say “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays” when we’re done checking out at Target.

This isn’t a comment on religious literacy in the United States. The truth is that probably nine out of ten regular church-goers would be surprised to know that hospitality is a core Christian practice.

This could be because here in the U.S. in general and in even in our churches, hospitality is less a core cultural practice, or core religious practice, and more something we do when guests come to town.

We put clean sheets on the beds, hang some fresh towels in the guest bathroom, stock up the fridge with cold drinks and snacks, and encourage our guests to make themselves at home. (And if we’re completely honest, depending on the guest, some of us...well, I’ll let you finish that sentence.)

That’s sort of the American version of hospitality, right? It’s kind and warm-hearted, but most of the time it’s also fairly basic.

Other countries understand hospitality differently. When I was studying in England some friends and I had a chance to travel together on one of our breaks through the Middle East--Israel, Jordan and Egypt, in particular.

I don't remember where we were, or even what country we were in exactly, only that the four of us were hiking in a remote area, a kind of desert area.

What I do remember is that, as if out of nowhere, a Bedouin man suddenly appeared, dressed exactly as you would expect a member of a nomadic culture to be dressed, wrapped up in head scarves and light woolen robes. And he invited us into his family's tent for tea.

I'll confess my friends and I were both pleased by this rare cultural opportunity, and somewhat startled by this sudden invitation. In terms of our ethnicity, our culture, our size, our looks, our language, our education and our religion, we could not have been more different from this man.

And yet he invited us into his family's tent for tea. Because that's what people do who live in deserts. That's what people do who understand that life can visit blinding storms on you in a moment's notice.

Who understand that when you're traveling in unfamiliar territory, it's easy to get lost and bewildered. People who know that, in the desert, when you can't find water or shelter you won't last long. And who know that such a fate could befall any of us, when we're far from home.

So one reason Americans don't practice hospitality in this same way is because America is just a different place than the deserts of the Middle East. Or is it....

The other reason that we church-going folk may not understand hospitality to be a Christian practice, as such, is because Jesus only talked about it rarely. Of course loving the stranger was embedded in so many things he *did*, but his original audience would have understood how central hospitality was.

Starting with the story Emily read, the Jewish people understood that the strangers who appear at your tent flap might actually be angels. Or just people in need of a life-saving sip of water or desperate for a bowl of soup and a crust of bread.

And so hospitality has always been a core practice in Judaism.

Indeed, listen to what Moses says about it -- Moses who is fresh from receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai:

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Yes, those are the same words we heard from the prophet Micah last week, the very phrase we're using as the theme for our stewardship campaign this year.

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? You shall also love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

If Jesus did not say much about hospitality it was because hospitality was just built into what it means to be a Jew. But perhaps just to be on the safe side, just to make sure all the followers of Jesus get the point, the writer of our text for today explicitly echoes these stories, these injunctions.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it.

The Greek here is fascinating. The word that is translated as "hospitality" here is *philoxenia* -- love of the strange.

Linguistically and theologically, it's a short jump from love of the strange, to love of the stranger, and from love of the stranger, to hospitality -- to welcoming people into your tent who are different from you in terms of ethnicity, culture, size, looks, language, education and religion.

Theologically this may be an easy move, but in practice it's much, much harder. I mean, really, would you invite a complete stranger into your home if one came knocking at your door?

In fairness, most people wouldn't, and not just because the world is a dangerous place nowadays. But more because *philoxenia*'s exact opposite, *xenophobia* -- fear of the stranger -- comes much more naturally to most of us. As Dr. Ayaz Virji recently discovered.

In a brilliant profile in the Washington Post, Stephanie McCrummen tells how, after completing his medical training, Dr. Virji and his wife, Musarrat, and his three children, Maya, Imran and Faisal, moved to the booming, cosmopolitan metropolis of . . . wait for it . . . Dawson, Minnesota (*Love Thy Neighbor?*, The Washington Post, July 1, 2017.)

In case it's not obvious, I say that ironically. Dawson is not the kind of booming, American metropolis where one would expect people with names like Ayaz, Mussarrat and Faisal to live.

It is, rather, a quaint little farming town in western Minnesota -- population roughly 1,500. It lies in Lac qui Parle county, about 30 miles from the eastern border of South Dakota. It's dominated by soy bean farmers and retired Lutherans who love to fish.

I say this on good authority. My aunt Carol, my mother's only living sibling, happens to live in Dawson. And I've been there any number of times.

When Ayaz Virji first arrived in Dawson, he enjoyed the respect that comes from being a doctor in a small town. But, obviously, he's not from around there. Given his funny-sounding name, it's also a pretty safe bet he's not Lutheran.

Indeed, Dr. Ayaz Virji is Muslim. He's of east Indian heritage. He was born in Kenya but he was raised in Florida.

Having lived in the U.S. since childhood, Ayaz Virji is just as American as my aunt Carol. And so after his medical residency, he took the job in Dawson because he wanted to help people, as any civic-minded American citizen would. And because he thought Dawson would be a good place to raise his children.

True, there was no mosque nearby, but Dawson was a friendly place, a place where everyone knew each other, where people were friendly and parents raised their kids on good, wholesome Midwestern values.

And sure enough, the staff at the hospital and clinic welcomed Dr. Virji. The staff at the school where his kids would attend welcomed him, and them. The town butcher welcomed him and his family, and even went so far as to prepare meat for them per the halal guidelines of their Muslim faith.

And then something shifted, almost literally overnight. On November 8th the people of Dawson voted for change. They'd voted one way for two straight elections but that night they voted a different way, as did virtually all of rural Minnesota.

And very soon after that, Dr. Virji began to realize that this change had personal implications for him and his family.

First came a proposed Muslim ban--which obviously felt personal. Worse, there was no outcry in Dawson, no protests in the streets, as there were in so many American cities, including Asheville and Black Mountain.

Suddenly Ayaz Virji felt like he and his family were surrounded by people who did not, in fact, welcome their presence in their quaint little town. It felt like life in Dawson had become inhospitable, a place where love of the stranger had been supplanted by fear of the stranger.

He began to think about moving elsewhere. The problem was, where?

He called his brother in Florida to talk about possibly restarting his medical practice there, only to learn that his brother had just received a fax at his office that read, "Get the (nasty word) out of my country you Muslim pig." Not surprisingly, his brother was planning to move to Canada.

After an intense internal struggle, Dr. Virji ultimately chose not to leave Dawson. Instead, he opted to channel his anger, and perhaps his fear, into something better, something different. Something that looked more like hospitality.

Actually, I think you could argue that it looked more like love. In short, he wanted to help his neighbors understand him and his faith.

And that's where the Lutherans enter the story. He was helped in doing this by one of his patients. A woman named Mandy France, who happened to be a seminary intern at Grace Lutheran, the big church in the center of town.

Together they developed a plan. Dr. Virji would write up some lectures on the nature of Islam and what it means to be Muslim, stressing that Islam is a religion of peace, as are the vast majority of its followers. And Pastor France would organize and promote them.

I wish I could say the story ends happily. Sometimes these lectures worked and sometimes they didn't. Dr. Virji was reasonably well received in Dawson, where people knew and even trusted him.

But his next lecture, in the nearby town of Montevideo, began with the town's people waiting for him, Bibles in hand. It ended with these same people calling him the antichrist. In between, the crowd shouted Bible verses at him.

Turns out that loving the stranger, welcoming the stranger, is a very hard thing to do. This is true even for people who know their Bibles well and take their faith seriously.

But lest you think this kind of thing only happens in rural America, where the residents' minds are as small as the towns they live in, or that xenophobia only prevails in regions where America's own version of religious fundamentalism dominates the cultural landscape, let me tell you another brief story.

About a month ago, Warren Wilson's president, Lynn Morton, was interviewed by an online trade publication called *Inside Higher Ed*.

She talked about her plan to engage in "deliberative dialogue" on campus -- that is, to intentionally engage the campus community in conversations across lines of difference. And how she hoped to bring more intellectual diversity to Warren Wilson College.

The article in which this interview appeared ran with the provocative and somewhat misleading headline:

College With Liberal Reputation Wants to Recruit Conservative Students

Someone posted a link to the article on the college's alumni Facebook page and, snap, the comments immediately began to flood in.

"It's official, I'm done giving to Warren Wilson," wrote one disgruntled alum. "This is not who we are," wrote another. "The new president does not support the LGBT community." "What is Warren Wilson becoming?"

More diverse, I wanted to reply. And isn't diversity one of the college's core values? Isn't welcoming and exploring intellectual and ideological diversity a venerable part of the liberal arts tradition? Isn't the college becoming more of what it aspires to be?

This was not my conversation to join, so I resisted the impulse to chime in. And I'm glad to say that, with some further explanation, President Morten's original intention to simply welcome and cultivate more diverse points-of-view on campus has since gained traction with the student body and the alumni base.

But I cite this story because I wonder if we might have our own version of this reactive impulse.

I'm fairly certain that for some of us it would be much easier to welcome a visitor into our midst, even on Sunday morning, who prays to Allah five times a day and reads the Quran, than it would be to welcome into our pews a visitor who voted a different way than we might have done last November.

That might make us feel noble and super progressive. But is that really who we want to be? Is one of our own core values to be angry at our neighbors?

Hospitality, remember, is rooted in a strange love. What if we took that idea seriously?

What if we directed our love not just toward people like Dr. Virji -- that is, people who are different from us but still fairly easy to love -- but instead we directed it, or, rather, in addition we directed it toward the people of Dawson, MN, or Swannanoa, NC?

That is, toward people toward whom we might be feeling anger or resentment for their part in the turn the country has taken, but who also might be feeling like strangers in their own country?

Please know I'm saying this to myself, too. I'm horrified and appalled by what's happening in and to our country. And the degradation continues virtually by the day. But I'm also determined that I am not going to be part of the problem. I'm going to be part of the solution.

I'm convinced that the one thing the world does not need more of right now is anger and indignation. Because the truth is that anger will not change the world, but it will change us.

The practice of hospitality will change us, too. Remember that Cherokee story about the two wolves--the violent and angry one, and the good and loving one? How they both live inside of us, and engage in a constant struggle for dominance? And how the one that wins is the one we feed?

No, what the world needs right now is not more anger, even if it's righteous anger. What the world needs more of right now is *philoxenia*. It needs a strange love.

And this strange love works on many levels. For let's not forget that the root word for *hospitality* is *hospital*.

Sometimes we need to direct our hospitable love inward, on ourselves, on our own members who are hurting or lost, or who feel like they've been swallowed up by a raging storm, or who are just angry and confused.

That is the ultimate aim of the first goal of our ministry plan: To be a tent of welcome and shelter and compassion for anyone who walks through our doors.

To be a place of welcome and shelter and compassion for ourselves, too. Because as we've seen over the last week, life can be brutally difficult, even when you least expect it. When blinding storms blow up out of nowhere, and we feel lost and bewildered, we all need a place of love and refuge, a community of love and refuge, when that happens.

We all need to be part of a community that practices *philoxenia*, a strange love that can heal ourselves and the world.

Amen