

Stewardship is Love

Hebrews 13:1-2

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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A 77-year-old woman has watched the neighborhood kids get off the bus every day since she moved into the neighborhood. She has gotten to know some of the families. She has learned their names. And now, she just wants to do something special for them. One afternoon at 3 o'clock she pulls a pan of cookies out of the oven, places them on a plate and goes to sit in her front yard. Soon she is surrounded by excited stories of the kids' day. And before long cookie baking becomes her favorite afternoon activity.

A high school boy goes to school early each morning by way of the local donut shop. He arrives at the school parking lot and sets up a card table and chairs in the bed of his pick up truck. He opens a box of donuts and simply waits. Each morning some of his closest friends come by on their way into school. But each morning it seems like there is someone different there, too, someone ready to strike up a conversation or just see what this kid is up to. And each morning he goes into school with a new friend.

A church has long tended to their building, working hard to keep it safe and well taken care of. In fact, sometimes their tending has verged on protecting, setting standards so high that they keep others out. But then the news gets out that the local homeless shelter doesn't have enough room for everyone who needs a safe and warm place during the cold winter nights. And without hesitation, the church opens their doors. They set up cots and make coffee; they collect cozy blankets and fix a warm breakfast in the mornings. And they discover not only the gifts they have to give, but the gifts of people they have too often dismissed.

And we hear these words from Hebrews, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.¹

Hospitality...stewardship...love. When we hear stories like these, we see the connection. We see how hospitality, the act of welcoming and making others comfortable, is so deeply connected to stewardship. Because, as we work to remember often, stewardship is not just about money – it is about caretaking...it is about tending to people, to the world, and even to things, in the way that God tends to us. And ultimately, above all else – hospitality and stewardship are both acts of love.

Acts of love in the sense, not of warm fuzzy feelings, not even of liking or even enjoying them all the time, but acts of love in that love gives us eyes to truly see people. Love invites us to look past masks and expectations, to look past defenses and first impressions, and to see people for who they really are. Love invites us to be honest about the struggles and successes, the gifts and the needs of others. And love invites us to respond to what we see and experience.

And when we are really seeing people, then we respond with hospitality, with stewardship, with generosity, by serving and by sharing what we have. It’s this beautiful cyclical thing where love, seeing someone for who they really are, leads us to care for them, leads us to want to choose the best for them. And when we choose the best for someone else, then we respond with acts of care for them, we respond by sharing and letting them share, we respond by serving and being served by their gifts as well, we respond with hearts that grow ever more generous. And before we know it, the practices of stewardship and hospitality, of generosity and sharing, have softened our hearts that we have become more loving.

¹ Hebrews 13:1-2, NRSV.

And this connection isn't new to us, but has long been real for people across time and space, certainly for people in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These simple words that we read from the book of Hebrews helped remind the people of that community of the importance of love and hospitality. After all, this was a community who was struggling. As Tom Long writes, “[The] congregation [to which Hebrews is written] is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus.”² They were struggling to continue in their Christian commitments and the author – really a preacher, because this book is more sermon than letter – the preacher begins and spends the first twelve chapters of Hebrews repeating big theological ideas, talking about the impact of Jesus. But then in chapter 13, he brings it back to the practical advice and starts with those verses we heard today. Let love continue. And show hospitality. And he reminds the people of this community that in doing so, they will be gifted with surprises as strangers become friends, as they entertain angels in caring for others.

And, again, this is not new to the Judeo-Christian story. Abraham and Sarah set a feast for three strangers and heard a promise about their own child. Two mourners who were heading home after the death of their leader and friend invited a stranger to stay with them and met the risen Christ. We ourselves have welcomed people – sometimes people we were unsure of, sometimes people who were different from ourselves – and we have stories to tell of the delightful gifts that we received when we really thought we were the ones doing the giving.

Today as we worship, we do two things. First, we remember people who have mattered in our lives. And while some among us live lives that are more reflective of a scrooge than a

² Thomas Long, *Hebrews* in the *Interpretation* series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 3.

saint, we are grateful that most people in our lives have given us glimpses of kindness, of generosity, of love. We are grateful for the memories of loves ones who have offered endless support, of friends who have always shown up when needed, of spouses who have helped us live the lives we dreamed of, of parents who have helped us see ourselves more clearly. We are grateful for the ways the people in our lives have helped us to nurture our commitment to love and generosity.

The second thing we do today is that, as a congregation, we look ahead. We look ahead to the coming year and we make commitments to continue to be active in our support of and involvement in the ministry that happens at and through First Christian. We do this because we believe in the mission of being a “...diverse community of believers and seekers, united in following and sharing the way of Christ with all persons...”³ We do this because we believe God calls us to create a place of welcome and openness where no matter what, “if you are among us you are one of us.”⁴

These two acts are deeply connected. For it is because someone who came before us shared love, was generous, opened the doors of their home or this church or their hearts and welcomed us in...it is because of these people that we can offer those same gifts. And when we do that, then not only do we continue to expand the reach of God’s love, but we continue to be gifted with strangers who become friends, with delightful surprises from people who we might not otherwise have even seen.

³ First Christian Church’s Mission Statement, www.icdisciples.org.

⁴ First Christian Church’s Welcome Statement, www.icdisciples.org.

And so, as we remember and as we anticipate, we hear again and again these words, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to stranger, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”⁵

May we show love as we have been loved. May we create a culture of hospitality that we may welcome others as we have been welcomed. May we be good stewards of all that we have, that our very lives may be used for God’s work.

Amen.

⁵ Hebrews 13:1-2, NRSV.