



“Entertaining Angels”

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, August 31 and
September 1, 2019

All Services

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come.
Amen.

You have probably heard by now, that at the beginning of August, we had our Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA. It's held every other year, at various places around the US. This time, it was held in Milwaukee, WI. There were over 900 people in attendance. Those who attend as official voting members are elected at the synod level (There are sixty-five synods altogether, and Trinity is part of the Lower Susquehanna Synod). The voting body is comprised of 40% rostered people (pastors and deacons), and 60% lay people.

This year, along with electing a bishop (or as it turned out, re-electing our current bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, to another six-year term), among the many things accomplished, was a vote to make the ELCA, in general, and congregations in particular, a sanctuary denomination. That vote has sparked discussion as to what is meant by “sanctuary denomination.” Which in turn, then, leads into the broader discussion of the refugee situation.

Realistically, within the time constraints of a twelve-minute sermon, I am not going to be able to give you a simple solution, mainly because I'm still trying to figure out how I feel on much of the issues. What I do want to talk about, though, is what I saw in our lessons today, and how I feel our scripture readings relate to the ideas of sanctuary, hospitality, and faith.

Our Hebrews reading talks about how we are to get along with one another; how we treat one another: how we treat the people we love and care for, as well as how we treat the people we don't know all that well, even how we treat the people we may not even like; and how, in doing so, we might actually, inadvertently, end up entertaining angels.

That concept of how do we treat others is reinforced in our gospel lesson, where Jesus says, “Don't think so highly of yourself that you need to be the center of

attention." That's really the Brock paraphrase. Jesus actually says something like: Don't sit at the head of the table, lest the host ask you to move out of the way for someone more important. But it still deals with the same basic tenant as the Hebrews passage: hospitality.

That idea, that concept, of hospitality, is central to our Old Testament understanding of Judaism. One of the primary social concerns of Judaism was . . . hospitality; looking after those who come to us, whether they were longtime friends, relatives, or complete strangers.

We have so many examples throughout the Old Testament of strangers being welcomed. With at least two of those examples - first involving Abraham, and then his nephew Lot - those strangers turned out to be messengers from God, that is, angels. And because those angels were welcomed and warmly received, Abraham and Sarah were blessed with a son, and Lot and his daughters were spared from the destruction of the town. Angels . . . hospitality . . . giving aid to those in need . . . this is how these readings got me thinking about this ELCA sanctuary vote.

Shortly after the vote, which passed by an overwhelming margin, Bishop Eaton sent out a letter to all congregations in the ELCA:

Our call to love our neighbor is central to our faith. In our baptismal covenant we promise to strive for peace and justice in all the world. One of the ways we live out this vow is through our commitment to welcoming the stranger. With this declaration, we publicly state that walking alongside refugees and immigrants is a matter of faith.

The letter also included some other "Talking Points" to go along with the letter. Those points expanded on what Bishop Eaton meant with that last sentence when she says the ELCA is publicly declaring that becoming a sanctuary denomination means "walking along side immigrants and refugees is a matter of faith." In other words, what we preach and agree with on Sunday in worship, we are called to put into action on Monday. Or, to say it more succinctly: Put your money where your mouth is.

Being a sanctuary denomination does not call for any person, congregation or synod to engage in any illegal actions. In Old Testament times, people could go into the temple, up to the altar, and claim sanctuary, as did Solomon's brother Adonijah declared himself king before their father, David, died. The problem was, David was backing Solomon to be king. When Adonijah heard this, he ran up to the altar in the temple, and claimed sanctuary, which Solomon granted him by sparing his life. (1 Kings 1:28-53 NRSV). The ELCA is not saying that we as a denomination, or Trinity as a congregation, has to begin doing such things, offering hiding places to those in trouble with the law. Rather, what is meant is

that we can walk with those people, making certain they receive a fair hearing, that they understand what is happening, and why.

Being a sanctuary denomination is about loving our neighbors. Wow. What a radical concept. What a radical, Biblical, Jesus quoted, concept. Love our neighbors. Huh.

Being a sanctuary denomination will look different in different contexts. Different congregations and synods are going to do different things, have different programs. We're not all going to be doing the same thing, in part because what works in one setting will not necessarily work in another setting.

And then, a quick reminder that, for the most part - and this is something that most of us forget: The ELCA is an immigrant church. It was founded by the European immigrants.

Here's an interesting fact I stumbled across the other day. According to a Pew Research study, the ELCA is the least racially diverse Christian denomination in the United States, with 96% of our membership identified as white. The second closest? The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, at 95% white. and coming in at 94% are the United Methodists. The Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church USA are more diverse than the ELCA, at 90% & 88%, respectively. Those are not statistics for any of those denominations to be proud of.

I do understand that this issue of immigration and refugees may be a bit more close to home for me, than it may be for many of you. Two of my grandparents, and two of my great-grandparents, came to the United States, through Ellis Island. And at least three of those ancestors faced discrimination because of their ethnic heritage. They came to this country for a better way of life; so that they, and their families, might have a greater chance.

I also comprehend that not everyone trying to come into this country is doing so with only good in their hearts. They are not all angels, either real or metaphorical. But I do believe that most of those who are coming here, are doing so in order to better themselves, and be a positive asset to this country. The majority of those coming here are running from awful, terrifying, often violent, situations. They want to give their children, or their hope of having children, a better chance. I believe that those are the people, those are immigrants, those are the refugees, that we as the ELCA are striving to walk with, to talk to, and help.

I'm not saying we should do this - help those in need, aid the refugees, assist immigrants - because we'll receive some sort of celestial reward, or earn another jewel in our crown. If the only reason that anyone does a decent thing

is in expectation of divine reward, then, that person is doing the decent thing for the wrong reasons.

Let's do the decent thing for the right reasons. Let's give aid to those in need; let's walk with those trying to work through the legal system; let's try to be that light in the darkness; not because it will make us feel better about ourselves; not because we'll get some divine reward; not even because we might be entertaining angels without know it.

Together, let's be that sanctuary denomination that helps people because it's the right thing to do; because helping others is what Jesus would have us do; because that's one of the ways that Martin Luther called us to live out our baptism, daily.

Let's walk with refugees and immigrants, the downtrodden and oppressed. Together, let's live out our faith in action. And if, in the process, we entertain some angels, all the better.

Amen.

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