

**The gift of humility**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on August 28, 2016, the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing. Hebrews 13:2

In the letter to the Hebrews we are urged to treat strangers with kindness because we never know when we might be encountering angels without knowing it. In my own experience, angels come to us in the form of real people sent by God to provide help or to bring a message or warning. I have had grace-filled moments in my life when complete strangers appeared and came to my aid or warned me about a danger just when I needed it. They disappeared as quickly as they came, never to be seen again.

There is an old Hasidic tale about a rabbi who asked his students when at dawn can they tell light from darkness. One student thought it was when he could tell a goat from a donkey. Another said it was when he could tell a palm tree from a fig tree. "No," said the rabbi. "It is when you look into the face of every man and every woman and see your brother and your sister. Only then have you seen the light. All else is still darkness." I believe that for us as Christians the light comes when we are able to see the face of Christ in every person we meet.

In my former parish, we kept the front doors of the church wide open all day and into the evening. It was a visible expression of being a welcoming church. Of course, this meant having various strangers wandering in to ask for help, but that was a risk we were willing to take. Some would approach me at the church door just before or after the service. One even appeared at the rectory door one Christmas morning. All of them, even those whose stories I suspected were false, deserved a measure of respect and a chance to be heard. The English writer G. K. Chesterton once wrote that we should treat everyone with respect, both our friends as well as our enemies, because in time they may become the same people!

Compassion, humility, integrity and hospitality are essential marks of the Christian person. One of the promises made at baptism is to respect the dignity of every human being. Americans have a misplaced sense of pride in the notion of American "exceptionalism" and how we have to be number one in everything. We may be a superpower with our burgeoning defense system, but we are lower on the scale in our educational and healthcare systems. There is nothing wrong with pride in itself. It is important for us to have a healthy sense of self-worth. People who are secure in themselves have a regard for the feelings of others without having to call attention to themselves.

In our gospel story today, Jesus is a guest at a dinner in the home of a prominent member of the community who is the leader of the Pharisees. In that ancient eastern culture, meals were served on low tables at which guests reclined in groups of three with the place in the middle reserved for the guest of honor. Jesus notes how some of the guests assume places of honor for themselves. He points out that if you take a lower place at the table, you avoid the embarrassment of having to be asked to move aside for someone more prominent. He uses this teaching moment to make the point that if we invite our social equals to dinner, they will be obliged to return the invitation, but if we invite the poor and the outcast who can't repay us, then we do so with no ulterior motive. Offering hospitality to those who can't do anything for us in return requires being well grounded and knowing who we are and from where we came.

Humility comes from the Latin for soil and earth, which is why we refer to unpretentious people as "down to earth." It is humbling to be down on our hands and knees digging in the garden or scrubbing the kitchen floor.

Christian humility also means being kind and considerate. A good measure of our own humility is our willingness to extend hospitality to those with whom we have little or nothing in common. Genuine humility is being aware of our strengths and weaknesses without being pretentious. Fulton Sheen, the noted Roman Catholic author and speaker in the 1950's, said that humility for us as Christians is like underwear; we should always wear it, but never let it show!

I have great admiration and respect for those who work in social services with children, teens, elders, veterans, the

homeless, the destitute and abused. One of the earliest forms of social work was in settlement houses in urban areas beginning with Jane Addams and the Hull House in Chicago. Years ago, I had the opportunity to know Helen Hall who had been Director of the Henry Street Settlement in the lower east side of Manhattan, one of the poorest neighborhoods in all New York City. Miss Hall worked tirelessly to develop practical and creative programs for the poor and destitute. She made connections for those in need of work and housing and provided them with opportunities to develop new skills. Her staff worked with addicts and gang members to create a more positive, non-violent environment. She worked tirelessly to find the resources to fund her programs and to bring awareness of her work to those in political power. .

Our society is better off for the dedicated efforts of social workers who make a better life for people in all sorts and conditions. In addition to working closely with the Wellspring Multi-Service Center in Hull, I serve on the boards of the Department of Children and Families that protects children from abuse and neglect. The Blue Hills Healthy Families program works with teen mothers helping to create a healthy environment in which they can be on their own. Social workers in myriads of situations do important work and are not always recognized for their efforts. They know that having the opportunity to make a difference in lives of others is its own reward.