

## “Angels All Around”

Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.

Psalm 127:1

According to my three year old grandson Wyatt, Miss Tammy is the best pre-school teacher in the whole wide world. And, she is. So a couple of weeks ago she began teaching her beloved brood the ABC safety rules about strangers. **Don't talk to strangers. Hold your parent's hand at all times. Don't wander off. Don't hold hands with strangers. If you see a stranger on the playground tell the teacher. Don't get in a car with a stranger. Don't believe anything a stranger tells you . . .** Now Wyatt is an extrovert, a people person, and a problem solver. He has no fear of strangers. When he enters a room he looks all around to find a playmate and to make a friend. But Wyatt also takes to heart everything Miss Tammy teaches him. So after school he had a big question for his mother about strangers. “Who is a stranger?” he asked. “Hum,” his mother mused as she searched for words he could understand. “When you don't know a person's name, that's a stranger,” she wisely replied. In response, Wyatt nodded and grinned with this new knowledge that had provided him with the key to solving his dilemma about how to obey the stranger safety rules. He had to wait to put his plan into action however until Clive's birthday party the following Saturday. “Happy Birthday Clive!” Wyatt said while giving him a hug. Then moving on in Wyatt style he ran over to the only stranger in the room and said: “Hi, my name is Wyatt. What's yours?” “Jennifer,” she whispered into the ear of her hero who had disarmed her fear of strangers by becoming her hand holding friend. Some at the party called him friendly, others deemed him clever, and a few religious folk called him an angel.

In his reflection on the Holy Spirit's activity in freeing the apostle Paul from prison, Rev. Felix Carrion wrote: *Who let Peter out of prison? The text says, “An angel.” I've heard people say that some relative, some*

*friend, some pastor, some child, some stranger, someone out there, was “an angel” to them. What I understand them to mean is that this person was sent to them in that precise moment when they were most needed. Of nowhere, and with no prompting from the person they reached out to, they appeared or called or sent a book or wrote a letter or prayed a powerful prayer. In that hour of need, and in their appearing, they were longer just a relative, friend, pastor, child, stranger, or someone out there they were an angel and their deed was indeed miraculous. . . . An angel is a messenger, sent by God, with a message. They point us in the right direction; they shine a light; they make clear the unclear; they open a door; they break chains; they move us from bondage into freedom's path. All kinds of people can and have done exactly these things at God's prompting. So, today be an angel. Or, at least, go ahead and recognize the one that was sent to you (recently or a long time ago) (UCC Daily Devotional, 11-3-09).*

Wyatt is a angel who opens wide the door of his heart by specializing in welcoming the stranger. What he doesn't yet know is that he is not the only child of God who has struggled with the tension between obeying group rules and loving people who are different. The Bible records many stories about Israel's dilemma of staying true to her religious identity while stepping outside the rules to fraternize with her non-Jewish neighbors. Last week we read about the foreigner Ruth and her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi. Their story of being angelic messengers of God had both a happy and hopeful ending. Naomi helped Ruth find a husband in her Jewish homeland. Ruth's commitment of steadfast fidelity to her Jewish mother-in-law inspired Boaz to make the marriage commitment to break the religious rules and marry the foreigner Ruth. From their union they gave birth to the grandfather of King David, who was the greatest King of Israel. By including the stranger in the community the Spirit was able to open up a future for Israel where there was none.

In his commentary on this story, Rev. David Shoop reminds us that Ruth's story of unexpected welcome and faithfulness “*shine a light on the nature of God's relational grace in the generous capacity to expand into new situations and problems*” and that the “*artfulness of covenant law is just flexible enough to welcome and provide for*” . . . the other who is equal i

God's eyes in the human community but different from the identity of the religious group (Feasting on the Word).

This week we remember the story of two other messengers of God from the prophetic tradition in 1 Kings. In another era of famine and economic hard times for God's people the Lord raised up the prophet Elujah as Israel's religious leader. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you' (1 Kings 17:8). Again, a big religious identity no-no . . . stepping into foreign territory and eating impure food from a gentile. Again, the tension involved in risky encounter of the stranger living at the margins of life. When Elijah requested food and water from the starving widow she said: 'As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug. I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die (vs.12). But because Elijah disarmed her fear of scarcity by assuring her that this was his God's way of creating a future for them, she chose to risk sharing her meager resources to feed the hungry man.

Both are down to earth stories human stories that reveal the tension in the human heart between turning inward to secure one's safety and reaching out to share personal resources with those unknown to us. Both are personal stories of faith about human beings who believed in the steadfast love of God for all people and who trusted in the extravagant generosity of the Creator's Spirit to provide abundantly for all. Both are stories of boundary crossing in encountering and in establishing interpersonal relationships with people who are different from the group. Both set a high Holy standard for our spiritual work of encountering, welcoming, and offering extravagant hospitality to the stranger.

Both stories also model the way in which our religious communities can flourish and grow. In the time of temple Judaism the psalmist prayed and the congregation sang: Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain (psalm 127:1). Unless angels speak and do the word of the Lord in

the making of loving relationships with strangers both inside and outside of the religious community . . . those who labor to build the household of God, do so in vain.

You probably don't recognize it, but this is my stewardship sermon. In my recent **Faith Matters** newsletter article on stewardship I closed with my understanding of stewardship.

Church stewardship is our commitment to take good care  
of our relationship with God,  
our relationships with one another,  
and our relationship with our self.

What this looks like in our religious tradition is an annual re-commitment of our time, talents, and treasures to the church. It means coming up with enough money to pay our staff just wages, to support our membership, and to keep up the Lord's house. Practically speaking what this means for each of us is a yearly re-assessment of our resources that we expect to be able to contribute to the church in the coming year. Stewardship is our personal commitment to give as we are currently able and to make adjustments in our pledge if our resources change (up and down.) In our particular time of economic uncertainty and reduction of covenantal givers it also means resisting the nostalgia for the good old days, rejecting the fears that turn us inward to care only for ourselves, and renewing our commitment to extravagantly welcome the stranger in our midst. It means saying "yes" to our calling to be angels to others.

Look around. Hope abounds! For there are angels all around.