

A Surprising Guest

Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Hebrews 13:1-3



¹Let brotherly love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

As a child, I was always excited when we had guests. With wide eyes, my brothers and I couldn't tear our eyes away from the guests. We did it because we were curious. One of our special guests was a missionary. Frankly, this missionary was my first personal encounter with a real missionary. He was an impressive figure. At least 2 meters tall (about 6 ½ feet tall). His black clothes and his wide-brimmed hat contributed to the mysterious atmosphere that radiated from this man. Because the car repair shop he frequented was 500 meters (about 1/3 of a mile) from our house, he often left his car at the repair shop and stayed with us for hours while his car was being repaired. He often sat up straight and calmly in his chair and said nothing. Sometimes he talked about his experiences in the concentration camp in India. All of that was more interesting than watching a movie and I hungrily devoured every word he spoke. Much later, when this missionary was already very old and sick, I heard that he traveled unannounced from congregation to congregation. First, he searched for a bed for the night; secondly, he really wanted to preach. A pastor's wife reports that one night, he stood before the door, completely soaked. The water literally dripped down from his wide-brimmed hat....and without a greeting he only said: "I must preach here tomorrow!" Surely these surprise visits were not always at the right time and the hosts were surely not always happy to accept the strange guest. But they did it anyway! And the question is, why? In my family, it was easy to explain. Everyone knew the missionary in black and without question he was invited into the house and fed. But as he stood before the door as a dark and wet figure, unannounced and wanting to preach, it became more difficult to explain. Even then you could figure out who this missionary was and quite often he wasn't only allowed into the house. He was also allowed to fulfill his wish and preach. And the reason was that you knew you belonged to a family. What is that supposed to mean? At my family's house there is a family tree and at the very top of the family tree there is a picture of my great-great-grandparents.... we are descendants from these two people. We are all a family from these two people. But you can't say that about the missionary dressed in black because he wasn't in my family tree. And yet, he was accepted as a member of the family, as though he also belonged to this family tree. He was also treated like a member of the family. The reason is the same. We belong to one family! And we also have a root and a family tree. This family tree begins with Jesus. Through Jesus, Christians all over the world share a story. Through Jesus, we have been baptized into one baptism and are therefore connected in the body of Christ. We are buried with Christ and will be resurrected with Him. Therefore, we are one family through Jesus. You can't be more closely connected. Just as I inherited unique

qualities from my great-grandparents, I also inherited special qualities from our Lord Jesus. And I don't just inherit qualities from Him. I also get my identity from Him. Even though Jesus lived a long time ago and He doesn't belong to my biological family, it is still so. Through Jesus, I am also connected with all the Christians in the world. Everyone has different origins: some are from China, others from Iran, others from America or Germany and many other countries. And yet, through Jesus Christ we are one family and belong together. The letter to the Hebrews wants to remind us Christians of this family. At the time, the author had to write this because the Christians were being persecuted. The community was torn because of this. Many were in prison and even more had died. In this situation, they had to be extremely careful not to let enemies into the house who could betray them. And so, distrust spread because they couldn't just allow everyone into the house. And sometimes even Christians were turned away because it was unclear if they were genuine. But such a feeling can be fatal for the Christian church. That's why the letter to the Hebrews warns: "Let brotherly love continue." Don't let the world tear you apart. How true these words are for us today. Many of our congregation members come from Iran or even completely different countries. Everyone has his own story, language, and culture. In such a context, it is all too human to look only at what the eye can see. It is all too human to seek out those who are similar to you, who make you feel comfortable. It is also the case that in our society, we have more interests that occur outside of the church. People meet in different circles and social meeting places. All these things shape identity so that we are quick to forget our roots in Christ and follow only after the things that we like or are interested in. And when there are many diverse people in a church with even more different interests among them, it could quickly happen that the congregation moves more and more from being centered on Christ to the edge where everyone has their own interests. We move away from Christ who is the center. And by doing that, we also move away from other church members until the day comes when we ask ourselves: "Why am I even a member of this congregation?" Before we have to ask ourselves this question, we should ask some other questions: "What do we get from the church anyway? And why am I in the church?" Now this question is not easy to answer because we cannot immediately see the answer to all of this. At least not with our eyes. Perhaps I can simply start by telling the story that the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of when it says: "*....for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*"

The story we are reminded of in the letter to the Hebrews (see Genesis 18), tells that Abraham was woken up from his midday nap by three unannounced guests. Abraham quickly invites them and offers them a meal. It was common to offer a meal to guests at the time. It's what everyone did. What Abraham didn't know was that God Himself, accompanied by two angels, was his guest. All of this would be made known to him later. And so, you see that it is the same for us in our community. Every Sunday we are together here – we are ordinary people. We are from different ethnicities. We all partake of a shared cup and eat the same body of Christ at the Lord's Supper. But all of that is just what we can see. In reality, Christ Himself hides within these things. Likewise hidden from our eyes are all the angels who are in heaven and rejoice over us. They rejoice that we are here! They rejoice that we confess our sins! And they rejoice that we can live from Christ. This same Christ with all the angels in heaven is not only with us. He is also all over the world where other such worship services are celebrated. And He is especially also there where people cannot worship Him in such church services. Where people sit in prison or have other hardships and cannot come to worship. He is even with the dying. Jesus holds our hands and binds us all together!

As I was sitting at the feet of the missionary dressed in black and listened to every word he said, I had no idea I myself would become a missionary. I knew even less that I would one day work in the very congregation that this man clothed in black had founded. But that's the way it is. You don't always know who you are giving shelter to. And sometimes, you don't exactly know why you are housing them. But God knows! Amen.