

Entertaining Angels

Hebrews 13:1-3

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September 20, 2015

The air traffic controllers were suddenly faced with the prospect of quite a few jets and planes landing unexpectedly at the airport in their small town. The controllers on duty were busy with the daunting challenge of coordinating the many landings, a stressful assignment. At that moment the off-duty controllers started arriving at the center. News of the situation had spread, and within a half hour the off-duty controllers started arriving at the center. Without being called, the off-duty controllers began arriving within just a half hour of hearing about the situation. I was reading those words in a public place and I had to turn away so no one would see the tears welling up in my eyes.

Why the tears? Before I tell you why, maybe I should share some of the other things that brought tears to my eyes. Off-duty air traffic controllers who show up without being asked is nice, but is it the type of thing that brings tears to your eyes? Well, in this case it did. And so did stories about people donating sheets and pillows. And people making coffee. And people giving away socks and underwear. And people offering rides in their cars. And people making meals. And people loaning their golf clubs. Each one of these acts is kind and caring, but worthy of tears? These are all kind of ordinary things, not huge sacrificial or costly actions. Still, when I read these things, each of these things, and all of these things, my eyes filled with tears. Each and every one of these actions are sort of run of the mill, ordinary, everyday acts of kindness, so why the tears?

There is a backdrop to this story. I think you will recognize it. Let me begin by telling you where this story took place. Gander is a town of some 10,000 people in Newfoundland. The man telling the story was on an airplane headed to Gander in the dead of winter when his seatmate asked where he was going. He said Gander. After asking why in the world he would go to Gander in the dead of winter, he also said, "Gander has the friendliest people you will ever meet." Indeed, the people of Gander have a reputation for being very caring, very friendly.

They showed their caring nature, they showed their friendly nature in just the right ways at just the right time. You see, the backdrop of this story is that it begins on a Tuesday morning more than ten years ago.

Gander is the type of town where the locals gather at the coffee shop. It is a town small enough that the mayor joins the others at the coffee shop as they talk about the weather and the local economy. That Tuesday morning was a beautiful one, it was a typical morning like any other, until someone called the lead supervisor for the air traffic controllers to come look at something on the television in the break room. What he saw is an image seared into the minds of anyone who has ever seen it. It was the image of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers. That is the backdrop of the story that brought tears to my eyes so many times when people did simple, basic, kind, and compassionate actions, like off-duty air traffic controllers showing up without being called. As the title of the book puts it, September 11, 2001 was for Gander, Newfoundland, the day the world came to town.

Because Gander has a huge airfield, 38 planes landed as all air traffic in and out of the United States was shut down. No one knew how long they would be there. No one knew if there would be further attacks. No one knew if there were attackers on other flights, maybe even the flights that were now on the ground in Gander. On Tuesday, September 11, 2001 38 planes landed and stayed on the ground at Gander. Those planes carried 6,595 people from 40 different countries, from as far away as Sri Lanka and Tasmania. What do you do when you live in a small town in an isolated part of the world and 6,595 show up unexpectedly? What do you do when the world comes to town? What do you do when the world comes to town against the backdrop of an act of terror that took so many lives and caused such fear and suffering and loss? In Hebrews we are told, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." What do you when the world comes to town? In practical ways, some bigger than others, but all of them important in their own way, the people of Gander and surrounding towns showed hospitality to strangers.

Where do 6,595 people stay? Schools were made available. Civic groups offered their buildings, churches opened their doors, and some people said come sleep at our house, we have an extra bed. The Red Cross and the Salvation Army were right at the center of all the efforts. Lest you think Gander is some mythical paradise where everybody lives in harmony and there are never disagreements, the town happened to be in the midst of a strike. The area's school bus drivers were on strike, and it was a nasty disagreement. But when the drivers heard what had happened, with 9/11 as the backdrop, with 6,595 people at the airport needing to get to shelter, they "laid down their picket signs, setting their own interests aside, and volunteered en masse to work around the clock carrying the passengers wherever they needed to go." (p.57, *The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander, Newfoundland*). Guess what happened to me when I read about the bus drivers setting down their picket signs...I had to turn away again. Against the backdrop of September 11, even things that seemed big and vitally important sort of looked a little different. There were bigger issues, deeper needs, and so personal wants and wishes were set aside, because the world had come to town and it was time to practice hospitality.

Even though the passengers were allowed to leave the planes and were moved to shelters, their luggage was not released. So no one had any extras, no toiletries, no change of clothes, nothing except what they were carrying. The little town of Gander had a clothing drive to beat all clothing drives. "The Salvation Army was in charge of gathering supplies...the local radio station and public-access television station started running announcements asking folks in town to donate food, spare bedding, old clothes—anything the passengers might need." (p. 57) What do you do when the world comes to town? You have a clothing drive. "At the town's community center, a line of cars stretched from the front door for two miles as people brought sheets and blankets and pillows from their homes for the passengers." We just visited Newfoundland. Our daughter and son-in-law Jonathan live there. Jonathan gave me the book about the day the world came to Gander. No sooner do we get back to Westerly than one of the youth of this church stands up and shares a moment for mission about having a drive to collect socks and underwear and toiletries for homeless veterans. As Andrew Yu was sharing his hopes that we collect 50 bags of clothes and

toiletries, I was seeing a line two miles long and thinking how good God is to stir the hearts of our young people here to entertain strangers...to reach out to the ones in need.

People take medicine. Can you imagine how many prescriptions would be represented in 6,595 people? For the most part the medicine was on the planes, in their luggage. What do you do when the world comes to town and they need prescriptions filled? The pharmacists in town got busy, working around the clock, making calls around the world, and they filled those prescriptions. Somewhere along the line someone asked if there were any pets on the planes. Yes there were. The pets were not allowed off the planes, so these animal lovers went and cared for the pets, fed, bathed, petted, and loved them. I was reading about these animal lovers and in my mind I saw Natalie Gray standing before us and sharing her hopes to raise money for the animal shelters in our community. Week after week she set up her table in Fellowship Hall, inviting us to support this important work. She understood showing appreciation. I came to her table every week because if I put a few dollars in she gave me a little bag of Scooby Doo graham cracker cookies. When all was said and done over \$1,000 was raised.

The golf course let any of the plane people play for free. But no one had their clubs with them. Word went out and the townspeople who had sets of golf clubs dropped them off for the plane people to use. There were children on the flights, and it became apparent immediately that they would need some toys. A toy drive ensued, and the local stores all chipped in and worked together. As in many small towns Wal-Mart wasn't particularly popular, but with the backdrop of 9/11 suddenly everyone was on the same team as they worked to get toys for the children. Some in the local stores sent people to Wal-Mart, and Wal-Mart was sending people to the local store, and to many it seemed like a scene right out of that wonderful holiday movie Miracle on 34th Street. KFC and Subway provided food. When the passengers were still on the plane, before it was decided to get them off and into shelters, some people who smoke were having a really tough time. Local people showed up with nicotine gum, and that crisis was handled. The cable company went to each of the centers to make sure they had cable television as so many needed to see and hear and be informed about

what was happening. The phone company set up banks of phones. Can you imagine what it meant to be able to get in touch with loved ones, to hear voices, to assure one another that you were okay, that everything was alright?

And for some the assurance that everything was alright was slow in coming. One of the couples on the planes had a son who was a firefighter in New York City. When they talked on the phone his wife, their daughter-in-law said they were sure he was okay, but they hadn't heard from him yet. The woman's heart was filled with the anxiety and fear in not knowing whether her son was safe. The woman whose son was missing, whose son was the firefighter, was named Hannah. When we know the story of the bible something as simple as a name can stir up our emotions. Hannah is a woman from the Old Testament who longed to have a child but was not able to. The story is told in I Samuel of her pouring her heart out in prayer to God. This Hannah, who had the gift of a son, was now pouring her heart out in prayer to God as she was filled with fear. One of the townspeople heard of Hannah's suffering, had empathy for that fear and anxiety, and came alongside to comfort and care for Hannah. The woman from town was named Beulah. Beulah is a name used by the prophet Isaiah. Writing in the days of the exile, when Israel had been defeated and the temple destroyed and the people uprooted and carried far from home, a promise comes that God will restore his people, that they will return to their home, and that once again they will rejoice. "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah." (Isaiah 62:4) Hephzibah means, "My delight is in her", and Beulah means, "Married." I had a dear friend who used to walk the halls of our church in Houston singing about Beulah Land. It is a land of hope, a land of promise, a land where God dries every tear and rights every wrong. Beulah sat with Hannah, and in those two women and their two names, so much of the life we live was captured. The fears and uncertainties of life represented in Hannah and the hopes and promises of that day when God's resurrection life fills this world with blessing and peace and joy and love. It is a heartbreaking moment in the book when Hannah finds out her son has died. May every weeping Hannah have a Beulah who sits quietly as an assurance that God is present even in the deepest valley and on the darkest night. And may we never forget,

never lose sight of the one who walked a lonesome valley so that we would never be alone in our sadness, in our suffering, and so that we would never be without hope.

One local woman opened her home for people to shower. She was so friendly and so hospitable those who showered were then invited to spend the night in a spare bed at the home. When she filled her beds she called on a neighbor and sent some folks over. Her husband was out taking care of needs of people and he came home late at night. He was exhausted, he knew his wife was exhausted, and so he decided to just sleep in the guest bedroom so as not to wake his wife, who had been giving so much to so many. After taking his shower “he dropped his towel and climbed into the guest bed wearing nothing more than wet hair and a weary expression on his face. And that’s when he realized he wasn’t alone. He was in bed with a seventy-year-old woman from Fort Worth, Texas. His wife had befriended this woman and decided to take her home. Remarkably, the woman was still asleep. He gingerly stood up, covered himself with his towel, and retreated to his bedroom. (In the morning) he said to his wife, ‘We have company I see.’ ‘Yes, that’s a lovely lady from one of the flights.’ She told her husband she couldn’t stand the thought of this old woman spending a night sleeping on the floor of a classroom at Gander Academy. So she’d brought her home and tried to show her a good time. Well, her husband said with a laugh, I almost showed her more than that.” (p. 134) So along with having to turn my head away when tears filled my eyes I also had some moments when I laughed out loud, which causes its own brand of embarrassment.

9/11 was a day of devastation. There is no other way to look at that day. And yet there is another way to look at that day. In the shadow of hatred and evil and death and destruction some folks realized that it was their responsibility to show hospitality to strangers. And some incredibly beautiful things happened. Two people who were plane people, who had to land at Gander and live in shelters, were part of the Rockefeller Foundation. They saw this little town do the right thing, the kind thing, the loving thing, and they were so moved they made major donations of some \$35,000 to the local school and the local church that housed them. One flight decided to set up a scholarship fund and thousands of dollars were pledged. Mercy begets mercy. 9/11 gave us a chance to respond in

a lot of ways. Let us not forget it gave us a chance to respond in ways that build, that nurture, that show compassion and kindness. In the shadow of those twin towers crumbling to the ground seeds of life were sown in the little town of Gander.

A rabbi was on one of the flights. That presented its' own challenge as he and his fellow Jewish travelers kept kosher. The townsfolk found the right food and set him up in a kitchen with all new pots and pans and it worked out okay. The rabbi saw everyone showing love and practicing hospitality. He began to ask himself, "What's in this for me? What role am I playing in all this?" After most of the other passengers had been cleared to depart, the Rabbi remained in Gander. The flights were leaving on the Sabbath, and he wouldn't fly on the Sabbath. A man showed up at the shelter where the Rabbi was staying. This man had lived in Gander forty years and was a well-known salesman. He was well-known, but very few people knew he was Jewish. Even his family, his wife and their seven children, had only recently been told he was Jewish. He had been smuggled out of Poland prior to the start of WWII. Because of the abuse he and his family were subjected to for being Jewish, the family that adopted him forbade him to speak of his ancestry. In the shadow of 9/11, in the year 2001, a Jewish man who had not spoken to a Rabbi since 1936 sat and told his story to a Rabbi, a Rabbi who just happened to come to Gander because of an act of terrorism. After telling his long and often painful story, the man showed the Rabbi his walking stick. On the handle was engraved a tiny Star of David. "Some nights he would wake up at three in the morning, having just dreamed of the religious music he'd heard as a child in Poland. A few days ago, he added, his mother came to him in a dream." (p. 223) The story does not have a dramatic resolution, but the man thanked the Rabbi for listening and said he felt a weight had been lifted off him. "He picked up his cane with the tiny Star of David, and slowly shuffled out the door. And with his departure, the Rabbi stopped wondering why he had been brought to Newfoundland." (p.224)

In the shadow of 9/11 a community of people in a tiny town in Newfoundland showed hospitality to strangers and some incredible tender, sweet, beautiful, and life-changing things happened. In the shadow of 9/11 God was present in powerful ways as people practiced

hospitality. While in Newfoundland a few weeks ago another story was unfolding. The world came to the borders in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled violence in Syria in search of a place of safety. There have been many moments that break our heart as we watch the images on television. But there are also moments where people show kindness to strangers. The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance ministry is working with people in these places to try to show kindness and compassion. It is not on our doorstep, but it is part of our world, and we know what God says about the world. God loves the world, the whole world.

A few years ago Lorraine Michaud stood before this congregation and told a story of a child whose family was facing homelessness and many of you have said it felt like this was something we could not ignore as a church. There is now Family Housing Support, and people do the most ordinary and everyday things to support FHS. They bring sheets and pillows, they make pancakes to raise money, they donate toys, they say prayers, and they even take a stroll in the park like we will do in a few weeks. Not every problem or issue will come to our doorstep, but when God does bring people and issues and pain and suffering our way, what else are we meant to do except show hospitality, whether to strangers, to neighbors, to family, to friends, to foreigners, and to ones whose lives are facing sadness and loss.

We found out a dear friend of ours from our time in Fresno, California died in a small plane wreck on Tuesday. There is no denying the sadness, the loss, the pain, and the sorrow. This man was seventy years old, his three children, now grown adults, were all in our youth group. One of his daughters posted on Facebook that within 30 minutes of finding out her dad had died, 70 people from church and the community had come to her mom's house to sit with her. I had to turn away when I read that post. I thought of Hannah and Beulah in Gander, and how important it is to be there, to be present, to weep with those who weep. We can't solve every problem, but we can gather together. We can be community.

So much happened in Gander, and we know of so many other things that happened in the shadow of 9/11. Today I want to leave you with thought. This is our Rally Day, a day to see what our church is doing here at Dunn's Corners and in our community and even in the world. If so much kindness and caring took place in the shadow of 9/11, what might we do as the Body of Christ? You see, we live in the shadow of something. We live in the shadow of the cross. We live in the shadow of the God who did not withhold his love but gave it freely, at a great price, sacrificially, with the heart of a servant. Today, and every day, the shadow of the cross covers our lives. And Jesus said this is how people will know you are my disciples, my followers, my friends. They will know it by the way you love others. Jesus said greater love has no one than this, that you learn to lay your life down for others. Jesus said if you want to be great in my kingdom, learn to be a servant. And the author of Hebrews said, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels, and they didn't even know it." Today is Rally Day. And there is a shadow covering our lives. It is the shadow of the cross where God's beloved son gave his life for us, so that we might learn to give our lives for others. This is the day the Lord has made...let us rejoice and be glad in it.