

“Entertaining Angels”

Hebrews 13:1-3

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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 nineteen 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 do 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.”¹ 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. There were deeper needs. Because of that, 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

¹ The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander, Newfoundland, p. 57

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." When I first read this book, we had just visited Newfoundland. Our daughter and son-in-law Jonathan lived there some eight years. Jonathan gave me the book about the day the world came to Gander. No sooner had I returned from that trip to Newfoundland than one of the young people of this church stood up and shared 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 right about that time Natalie Gray, again one of our young people, stood before us and shared 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, the presence of Wal-Mart had caused some challenges for the small local stores. But all of a sudden local stores were sending 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, the one who landed in Gander, Newfoundland, she had the gift of a son. The prayers she was pouring out were the prayers of a mother gravely concerned about the well-being of her son. 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, in those terrible days when the

people were uprooted and carried far from home, a promise came that God would restore his people, that they would return to their home, and that once again they would 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.

Because we have just passed another anniversary of 9/11, my thoughts have returned to the good folks of Gander, Newfoundland. But I am also thinking of those good folks because we are in a situation that bears many similarities. There are certainly differences. With the onset of the Coronavirus Crisis the world did not come to town. Instead, we all were told to stay home. But once that reality set in, we have found ourselves confronted with myriad needs, as vast as the needs that faced the people of Gander. They had no playbook, no check list to turn to in how to handle a crisis like the one they faced when the world came to town. But I do believe they understood the importance of one particular verse from the bible, a verse that is known beyond the groups that meet to

worship God. The command they all understood and the command they all tried to put into practice is the command that says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And because they practiced that command, they might well have experienced the wonderful delight spoken of in Hebrews, the delight of entertaining angels unawares.

Just as quickly as the world came to town, the world left town. The flights loaded up and everyone departed from Gander. Our crisis is lingering. We are now six months into it. Like the good folks in Gander, Newfoundland, we have no playbook, no check list to turn to in how to handle a crisis like the one we face, a crisis that now encompasses a pandemic spawned by a deadly virus, a devastating economic crisis, and a crisis erupting over racial justice that has found its voice in the phrase Black Lives Matter. No playbook. No check list. But we do have a particular verse that is of vital importance. We have a verse that if we strive and struggle to find ways to practice has proven for thousands of years to lead to experiences of healing and hope. We have the verse that says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In reality, we have more than that, don’t we? We have a Lord named Jesus who wraps a towel around his waist and washes feet, who becomes the servant of all. No playbook. No check list. But we do have a God who puts a towel in our hands and says, “Go and do likewise.” Serve. Help. Share. See. Listen. Care. Be concerned. Step up. Step in. Step out. Love. Love. Love. And the greatest of these is love. And it would not surprise me one bit as we wrap the towel around our waist and offer ourselves in service to others if we in turn discover the blessed and joyful reality that we too have entertained angels unawares.