

“Sanctuary Series: Revisiting the River: God’s Spirit Rocks the Boat”

Sermon Title: “**Checking Out the Scene**” (1 of 5)

29 August 2010

Preaching Text: Hebrew 13:1-8

First UMC—Arlington, Texas 76011

Recently we as a church engaged in a time of “Spiritual Self Assessment.” “Navigating the River of Life” was our Spiritual Formation and Discipleship Committee’s attempt to engage our congregation in a five week time of spiritual discernment. Our question: What does it mean for a person or a church to be on a spiritual journey?

We all no doubt understand why it is important for us to keep growing spiritually. Yet honestly most of us don’t really know how to do it. One theory suggests that if people do not know what to do, then they tend to do nothing. Thus we explore where we are in our faith by means of a “River Metaphor.” If you are in a good place, then help others in their journey or even begin it.

Along the way we will discover specific places that mark our faith journey in time and space. These so-called markers help identify where we are so that we recognize how God keeps us moving along and growing. Our River Guide Book is designed as a five-week study to review the five markers along the River (1-Checking out the Scene, 2-Stepping in the Water, 3-Diving Deeper, 4-Riding the Rapids, and 5-Going fishing).

This first week, called “Checking Out the Scene,” we look at a gift we can offer those who seek to know God, but don’t exactly know where or how to begin. Perhaps these persons have never made a commitment to follow Christ or to be a member of a Christian Church. We can help someone begin a journey of faith and this is where our reading for the day comes in. Hear the day’s lesson, Hebrews 13:1-8:

[13:1] Let mutual love continue. [2] Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. [3] Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. [4] Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. [5] Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

[6] So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

[7] Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. [8] Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

As we begin to check out the scene we begin with the concluding chapter of Hebrews—the letter or perhaps a treatise or an extended sermon. May we focus on the verse that tells us: “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it?*” This section of Hebrews offers the readers guidance regarding the shared life in the Christian community. We are to “show hospitality to strangers” which means to give welcome to traveling Christians. This may seem odd, but in the first century, inns or what we would call motels/hotels existed, but often prostitutes and bandits overran these enterprises. Consequently they were not particularly “family/children friendly” and because of this circumstance Christian travelers normally lodged in other Christian’s homes.

This lesson also reminds us of a bonus to hospitality which is entertaining angels unaware—and the author is not just whistling Dixie! In the Old Testament there is a lot of entertaining angels unaware! Perhaps we will entertain “angels,” as Abraham did at Mamre—the first reference in our text. You remember when the Lord appears to Abraham as “he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” This account teaches the offering of hospitality—the gift of welcome.

Three men abruptly appear to Abraham, almost as if from out of nowhere. Abraham then does something that no self-respecting ancient patriarch would do—he

runs. No ancient person commanding respect ever condescended to running. Running is strictly children's province. Yet as a sign of respect, welcome, and hospitality, Abraham runs to greet these strangers/visitors. Abraham also extends welcome by bowing down and suggests that he "bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves." Embedded in these gestures of welcome, Abraham exercises the stewardship of hospitality.

Genesis also tells gruesome story of the faithful Lot entertaining two angels who come to Sodom (19:1-3). Unfortunately others in town were not as hospitable. In addition, Judges tells two stories of entertaining angels. The first story introduces readers to Gideon as he entertains an angel at Ophrah (Judges 6:11-18). The second such story occurs when Samson's parents provide hospitality to an angel (see: Judges 13:3-22).

In the New Testament epistles we also see the theme of welcome/hospitality: "Be hospitable to one another without complaining" (1 Peter 4:9). Without complaining? The old preacher's joke about the little girl saying grace after being instructed by her mother to just pray what she has heard her mother pray. The youngster concludes, saying, "Oh Lord, why did I invite these people here today?" Like giving for believers, hospitality may be offered out of gratitude—not duty or compulsion. Other epistles suggest similar themes about welcoming/receiving people/strangers as friends (see also: 3 John 1:5-8).

Paul too knew about hospitality. When Lydia had received a great gift from Paul and his companions as they taught down by the riverside, (Acts 16:14-15) she also offered them her home. We should not forget that Lydia also had a gift to give Paul and the missionaries. She gave them a necessary gift of hospitality. There are times when all of us need hospitality. Paul and his friends were no exception.

Paul may be one of the most important New Testament writers to recognize the link between giving and hospitality, for example in Romans 12:13 he writes: “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Paul begins his last recorded words in Romans with a warm mention of one of his female disciples: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well” (Romans 16:1-2).

If we want to help people check out the scene and eventually step into the river, then the easiest and most effective way is to offer seekers a gift of hospitality, or in biblical terms—“do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Anyone can do it—anyone.

In 1977 on internship at Grace UMC in Tuloso-Midway near Corpus Christi, I watched a couple of teenagers move into our tight-knit youth group. Their father was a California preacher who was opening a counseling office and the family knew no one. The new siblings were more or less overlooked and shoved into a corner—this often happens to new people. I watched and soon one of the high school seniors—“Mr. Popular”—came over introduced himself to them and proceeded to introduce the youngsters to everyone. He even said they were friends, although I knew he met these two only minutes before. He made a path for these two strangers into the group and gave an excellent witness that even if you are seventeen years old you can display the wisdom of Solomon and the grace of God as demonstrated by Barnabas and Phoebe and Lydia.

Maybe by practicing the Christian gifts Hebrews mentions on one another (hospitality, love, remembering the less fortunate, marriage, love of money/generosity,

and prayers of remembrance for leaders) then we will be ready to practice these Christian gifts of the spirit on the rest of the world.

David N. Mosser, FUMC, Arlington, Texas 76011