

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 28, 2016 (Proper 17, Year C)

One of the things churches take very seriously is the whole notion of the Sunday morning welcome. We have ushers and greeters and newcomers' packets and welcome tables during coffee hour. Recognizing that walking into a church for the first time can be intimidating, a tremendous amount of effort goes into making visitors feel welcome.

Now some parishes do this better than others. I've personally had every experience from being completely and utterly ignored to being treated like a minor celebrity. There's a fine line between genuinely feeling as if people are glad you're there and feeling as if the congregation is simply desperate for new blood — in a vampire, blood-sucking kind of way. As I like to tell people on our newcomer's committee, there's a fine line between "welcoming" and "stalking."

But this whole idea of welcome isn't simply a veneer of good manners. And hopefully it's not just the adoption of certain best practices from the hospitality industry, as passed on through the filter of church growth consultants.

Rather, if it's authentic and not just self-serving, welcoming the stranger is a spiritual endeavor. We hear much about this topic in the Bible. The people of Israel are reminded again and again to treat the aliens who reside in their lands with dignity and respect. God reminds them that they, too, were once aliens in a foreign land when they lived in the land of Egypt. And it is a Scriptural mandate modeled by Jesus himself, over and over again. We don't get to choose who shows up but we do have a choice in how they're treated once they arrive.

Given this emphasis on welcoming, you can understand how shocked my friend Laurie was last Saturday when she awoke to find graffiti all over the front doors of her church in Lexington, Kentucky. Now to set this in context, remember that down South there's no great dividing line between pre and post-Labor Day. Things are in full swing down there. Vacations are over, school has started, everybody's already back in the fall routine. In fact, at St. Michael's where Laurie is the rector, they had a big Sunday planned with a service to welcome all the entering students from the University of Kentucky. It would be like me waking up the morning before Homecoming Sunday to find graffiti all over the doors and the front driveway. In other words, this wasn't some lightly attended August Sunday in New England (glad you're all here by the way, and it's great to be back).

Now, Laurie texted me photos of the graffiti. And I assure you, this wasn't just your garden variety, colorfully creative 1970's New York City subway graffiti. This was crude, hateful stuff that invoked the political, the satanic, and the, um, anatomical. So what do you about this? Well, the first thing you do is alert the parish and suddenly power washers appear and chemicals you didn't even know they sold at Home Depot show up and there's a whole group of parishioners cleaning and scrubbing and washing away the hate. In several hours it's all gone, with nary a trace left.

Which is great. Except that the emotional scars of hate-speech scrawled across the entrance to your sacred space remain etched in the community's consciousness. And I love what Laurie did the next day. She amassed several buckets of sidewalk chalk and, as part of the liturgy, she invited everyone outside to cover the sidewalk and driveway with messages of God's love. Parishioners of all ages expressed their own responses through words and art to the hate that just 24 hours before had been scribbled all over the front of their church.

To me, this is what faith is all about. It's not about ignoring hateful rhetoric but responding in love. It's not about being reactionary in the face of evil but being proactive in the name of God. It's not about rejecting others but accepting them as fellow children of God.

As Laurie said to the news media when they inevitably showed up, "The vandalism is not the story. That's a part of it. The end of the story is always love in the Christian faith. When people send out into the world hate and violence, our responsibility is to respond with love."

In a lot of ways, this is why it's so important to welcome strangers. We never know where people are in their respective journeys or what they're going through. As we heard this morning in the Letter to the Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." It's the whole idea of treating one another as if we are encountering Jesus himself. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus even identifies himself as the stranger to be welcomed when he says, "Just as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me." So we see again and again that welcoming the stranger is not just about being polite, it's about being a Christian.

And we can't pick and choose who to welcome. We can't only welcome people who look like us or act like us or talk like us. That's too easy. And true hospitality is hard work. Think about the dinner party Jesus wants us to hold. "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Every time we gather to worship, we are hosting a dinner party in Christ's name. That's why we seek to be intentional about our Sunday morning welcome. We fling open the doors and open ourselves to being transformed by those who enter. We offer them something to be sure — our understanding of Jesus' love for us. But we also receive something in return as we become a more diverse and complete community of faith. The church as the body of Christ is not intended to be static, but a dynamic reflection of the fullness of God's kingdom.

Two weeks from today, when we get that post-Labor Day crush and people scramble to return to the fall routine, I encourage you to be welcoming (yes, even if someone you don't recognize sits in *your* pew). It's not just the responsibility of the ushers or the clergy to welcome strangers into our midst. It's up to you. Even if it takes you out of your comfort zone to reach across the aisle and offer words of introduction and encouragement. Remember, "do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby," as we hear in the more poetic King James Version, "some have entertained angels unawares."