

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, August 29, 2010
 Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 17-C
 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14; “Angels Unaware”
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It was a rainy, cool day in December, 2001, when I was honored to serve at St. Paul’s Church in Lower Manhattan – that sacred space just one block from Ground Zero – the church which had not had even one window broken when the Towers came crashing down. Days after September 11 the church was open, holding noontime prayer services, serving police, firefighters, all who were there – feeding, sheltering, providing water, clothing and other supplies – all that was needed to do the work that needed to be done – ministry in the most profound definition of the word. Groups from churches all around the country sent volunteers to this ministry – and this day it was my turn to share in this ministry. Between times of sitting and listening to firefighters and police officers and iron workers, I spent some time outside at the “wall” – on the iron link fence were huge banners that people signed, offered prayers, added to the flowers and candles and other remembrances around the sidewalk. Out of the crowd there on the sidewalk, a young woman with a baby in a carriage and holding the hand of her toddler came up to me. She wore a head covering – and as she came to me, she burst into tears – she clung to me and said over and over again – I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. We’re not all like those men – I’m so sorry.

I had my collar on – I don’t often wear it – and she had the traditional head covering – there we were, two women of faith, clinging to each other there on the sidewalk in front of St. Paul’s, our hearts joined in anguish, in a place where the dirt and dust and smell and deep, deep sorrow, permeated our clothes, indeed our very souls.

I’ve been thinking about those moments a lot lately, seeing her face, feeling her tears, as the controversy rages about building a Muslim Community Center short blocks from Ground Zero. I can only imagine what she’s feeling and thinking these days. And I’ve been thinking about insiders and outsiders, us and them, about hospitality – the generous receiving of the stranger, about how all of us as people of faith can believe, can practice the radical hospitality to which Jesus calls us.

I’d ask all of us this morning to take a few moments to remember – remember those times when you’ve felt out of place somewhere – where your presence wasn’t valued, acknowledged, or worst of all, resented. Remember those times when you’ve felt like an outsider – when you’ve felt what “other” feels like. When there was no room for you at the table.

I wonder – has this ever happened when you were at worship? Visiting a church? I’ve been remembering this week.

When I was in seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, I went to a lovely big stone church – the biggest UCC church in the area – I went 3-4 times, signed the pew pad, but I never went to coffee hour – that doesn’t come easily to me in a strange place – never heard a word from the church. One Sunday at coffee hour they had a SERV table – part of the ministry of Church World Service featuring hand made items from all over the

world for sale - I was in seminary, had very little money for Christmas gifts and thought I'd check it out – so I went to the coffee hour – I couldn't get near the table for the crowd around it – nobody talked to me or acknowledged my presence at all – I left and never went back.

The next week I went to another UCC church in Newton and the difference was staggering – I was warmly welcomed, escorted to coffee hour, introduced to people – including the ministers – both of them – and invited to participate in the life of the church however I'd like or had the time to do among my studies. And this welcome happened every week –not just the first week I visited them. I spent the remainder of my time in Newton worshipping at this church – attending adult classes, participating in Lenten study series, going to potlucks - I even taught a Sunday School class. I was gone for a period of time because I was doing my field education in another church but I always, always felt this Eliot Church was my home away from home. And I'll not forget those anxious times as I was waiting for a call to my first church how those people prayed for me, supported me, surrounded me with God's love, expressing the hospitality that Jesus calls us to express. It gave me a new understanding of what the Body of Christ, the community of believers who gather each week to worship and then scatter to serve, is supposed to look like, how it's supposed to behave, and what a difference that hospitality can make in the life of those called together as church. This understanding has informed my ministry all these years – I dream of every church being as hospitable as the Eliot Church. And it's a dream that can come true.

But it's not true everywhere, is it. Tom Long, distinguished professor of preaching at Emory, says that he grew up on a small community church in rural Georgia. Most of the farmers and shopkeepers and their families who attended this church were everyday, ordinary people. Long remembers one Sunday morning when something happened that challenged their faith.

While they were in worship, a stranger appeared, walking in the side door. Judging from his clothes and appearance, he probably had wandered over from the railroad tracks, people figured. He was perhaps one of the drifters who rode the rails. Perhaps he was someone who had come in off the highway, just passing through. The stranger walked in and walked past the preacher and the congregation in the middle of the sermon. The congregation all looked at the man and he looked back at them. The preacher even stopped his sermon and stared at the man. The man did not take a seat; he was not offered a seat. The man spoke not a word and not a word was spoken to him. He simply looked out across the congregation, paused for a few moments, and walked out the door on the opposite side. The preacher collected himself, and he continued with his sermon.

But after church that day, says Tom Long, members of the congregation gathered around the base of the big oak tree out front and they discussed what had happened. For the next two or three Sundays they gathered again under the oak tree after the service and continued their discussion. They never knew who the stranger was. But they knew, says Long, that God had put before them a kind of moral test. And they had flunked. They had their opportunity to stand up and be faithful and show hospitality to the stranger, the same sort of hospitality that had been shown toward them by God. And they flunked the test. What is hopeful to me, though, is that they realize it – that's of course the first step. But how are they making room at the table for the next stranger to come along?

Isn't it true that every congregation is measured to a great extent by its ability to receive the stranger. How well do we measure up?

St. Paul's UCC in St. Paul, Minnesota, has been a struggling church – when the pastor left an interim minister was hired to lead the congregation in a discernment process. They have a large campus but worship attendance has dropped and there were under 15 children in the Sunday School. The congregation is working through future planning – if they want to continue in ministry in St. Paul, what has to happen for them to do just that? How should they be using their buildings to serve the community? How could they build up their Sunday School? What should their ministry look like in the community today? The congregation made a decision: to reach out, to stay in ministry even if it didn't look like what it had in the past, and perhaps most importantly, to practice radical hospitality – the same hospitality that Jesus has extended to them.

Many of you remember Marty Watson – active here in this church for many years – member of MOM, former president of the Church Council, member of the choir, delegate to the United Church of Christ New Jersey Association – two years ago she moved to St. Paul and was looking for a church. St. Paul UCC was close to where she was living so she decided to try it out. I have a bit of a confession to make here – I'd gone online to the UCC website, found St. Paul's in her neighborhood and emailed the pastor alerting her that Marty might be coming as a visitor. The UCC clergy network works really well – if we use it. Anyway, Marty walked into the church one Sunday morning, was greeted by a member, and immediately introduced to the pastor. Norma Rae's reaction: Marty, we've been waiting for you.

Marty was invited to sit with the woman who'd greeted her, was accompanied to coffee hour – they have a sit down light lunch every week for their coffee hour – now, that's a fellowship hour – was invited to the adult study session during the week – she called me the Sunday of her first visit and talked on and on about the radical hospitality she'd experienced that day – the excitement in her voice was wonderful – she'd found a home away from home. Today Marty is an active member in a growing church. There was room for her at the table – not just room, but they were waiting for her to take her place. What a joy she's found. And that church is well on its way to thriving – all because of the radical hospitality that's become part of their culture. St. Paul's is measuring up.

A minister was on vacation and decided to attend worship at a nearby church – he went to the front door and found it locked. There were no signs directing visitors where to go – he walked around, trying other doors and they were all locked as well. He knew he was on time for Sunday worship but saw no people to ask where to go. Finally he gave up and left. Later that week he met someone who attended that church and told of his experience – the response? Oh, we always use the back door to enter the sanctuary – nobody ever comes in the front doors so we don't unlock them. He remarked, you probably don't get many visitors, do you.

We gather to worship this lovely summer morning outside – in view of the whole world going by. That's making a profound statement, isn't it – no doors to unlock, no secrets about where to go – and that's a wonderful thing. But I hope we all recognize that there is more to radical hospitality than outdoor worship – we throw open our hearts as well for hospitality means we take people into the space that is our lives and our minds and our hearts and our work and our efforts. Hospitality is the way we come out of

ourselves. Jesus invites himself into our lives and when he does, he introduces us to a very different way of living in the world. Hospitality, the gracious receiving of the stranger is what Jesus does. Hospitality is also what Jesus commands us to do – we are to receive one another, especially those in need, as Jesus has received us. Because, sometimes when we think we're just being nice to strangers, receiving guests, meeting angels unaware, practicing hospitality, sometimes we receive God. So may it be. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, teach us to follow you by living in the world as you live. Help us to receive one another as you have received us. You see into all places, you know us better than we know ourselves, you are aware of what most needs doing, the brokenness that most needs healing. Go before us and inspire us to follow, that your will may be done and that we may have the part you have assigned us in the doing. Help us to be your partners in the ministry of the Word. Amen.