

2019 08 25 – Alien Angels

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Just over a week ago billboards appeared across Canada with the message “Say No to Mass Immigration.” They included a picture of Max Bernier the leader of a new political party in Canada. Bernier denied responsibility for the billboards but did not deny that their sentiment matched the rhetoric of his party. This type of message is all around us. We see it in the news, on social media and we hear it from the President of the United States.

This type of message is, of course, based on fear. Any type of prejudice or exclusion has fear at its heart, especially the fear of difference. Those who are different are the aliens or the strangers among us. They are often those who are at the margins of our society. There are so many ways that we can be different from our neighbour – culture, values, race, language, education, sexual orientation, gender, religion, politics, economic status, mental health, physical abilities – the list is endless. Any of these differences can lead to fear, prejudice and exclusion.

A second fear is the fear of loss or change. Those who argue against immigration eagerly disseminate this particular fear by talking about loss of jobs, loss of status, and loss of culture. Of course, at the base of this fear is concern about the loss of money, loss of security and loss of power. Whether these fears are based in reality doesn't seem to matter. The impact of fear, prejudice and exclusion is real even if the facts that they are based on are misleading or false.

Prejudice and exclusion exist in all areas of our society. These billboards were promoting the ideas of a federal political party. But there are people at all levels of government living with and espousing these same prejudicial fears. We find these fears in our schools, our health systems, our police forces and even our churches. Each one of us, myself included, has grown up with and lives with the fears that can result in prejudice and exclusion.

Jesus knew about these fears and he used stories to teach us courage, inclusion and radical hospitality. In today's gospel reading Jesus is eating a meal in the house of one of the leading Pharisees. He is the stranger, the alien in the room and the fear and distrust at the table is palpable. The Pharisee's regular guests are watching Jesus closely, waiting for him to make a mistake so they can be justified in their prejudice and disdain for this upstart rabbi.

Jesus notices the other guests jockeying for the best position at the table and decides to tell a parable, a teaching story. He speaks of being invited to a wedding party and how embarrassing it would be if you took the place of honour and then someone else of higher status came along and the host had to ask you to move down. Jesus describes how much better it would be to sit in the lowest place and have the host invite you higher. With this story he illustrates the dangers of pride and the importance of humility.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there, he says, "Whenever you give a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends or colleagues or relatives or wealthy neighbours. They might invite you in return and thus repay you. No, when you have a reception,

invite those who are poor or have physical infirmities or are blind. You should be pleased that they can't repay you, for you'll be repaid at the resurrection of the just " Jesus is telling the guests at the Pharisee's dinner that they should be practicing radical hospitality; that they need to invite strangers (aliens) into their homes and into their lives. It isn't enough to send money to help the poor, the disabled, the refugee, we need to reach out and connect on a deeper level. Instead of saying no to mass immigration, Jesus would have put up billboards telling refugees and immigrants to come right on in!

In fact, today's reading from Hebrews emphasizes that very point. It begins with the words, "Continue to love each other as sisters and brothers. Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Angels are, of course, messengers of God. The Hebrew people who received this letter would have been familiar with the story of Abraham and Sarah and how they showed incredible hospitality to three strangers who arrived at the entrance to their tent (see Genesis 18:1-15). It was only later that they realized who they had welcomed into their home and into their lives. It was only later that Abraham & Sarah knew they had entertained angels.

As I was preparing for today's sermon I went back to a book that I was given by a good friend nearly twenty years ago. The book is called *Becoming Human* and the author is Jean Vanier. Vanier founded L'Arche, an international federation of communities for people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them. He continued to live as a member of the original L'Arche community until his death earlier this year.

In this particular book, Jean Vanier tells many stories about the people with developmental disabilities who live in L'Arche communities. These people are, of course, viewed by society as aliens and strangers. They have traditionally been locked away in institutions, separated from those of us who are seen as normal. Vanier speaks of how he discovered the "way of the heart" in L'Arche. He says, "This way of approaching each individual, of relating to each one with gentleness and kindness was not easy for me" (*Becoming Human*, page 88). Vanier explains that his naval training made him quick, competent, and efficient but not very gentle or kind. Then he tells the story of Antonio:

Antonio came to our community in Trosly when he was twenty years old, after many years in hospital. He could not walk, speak, or use his hands; he needed extra oxygen to breathe. He was a weak and fragile man in many ways but he had an incredible smile and beautiful shining eyes.

There was no anger or depression in him. That is not to say that he didn't get annoyed from time to time, especially if his bathwater was too hot or too cold or if the assistants forgot about him! What is important is that he had accepted himself just as he was. Antonio could not love by being generous, by giving things to people or by doing things for them; he himself was too needy. He lived a love of trust. In this way, he touched many people's hearts. When one loves with trust, one does not give things, one gives oneself and, so, calls forth a communion of hearts.

(*Becoming Human*, page 91)

I believe that Antonio was an alien angel, one of the strangers that we naturally fear but who, when we get to know them are clearly messengers of God.

I am so grateful that when those immigration billboards appeared across Canada the outcry was loud enough that they were removed within a week. Immigration has always been and will continue to be an important building block for our multicultural nation.

Whether we represent our country, our community, our employer, our church or our family Jesus calls us to show radical hospitality to the strangers, the aliens in our midst. Jesus calls us to open our hearts and our minds to alien angels and to invite them to our dinner tables and into our lives.

I'm going to end today with a poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes. He calls it *Hospitable*.

Make of your life a welcome home.
Make your heart a buffet of goodness.

Make yourself a front porch, wide,
two chairs, only one step up.

Think of yourself as a free sample,
a rocking chair, a bench by a lake.

People need a place to belong, to matter,
to receive without question.

Round up all your furniture of love and respect,
all your heirlooms of special treatment,
and put them out on the curb.
Go ahead and make a sign that says FREE.

It's not about airing your laundry, or "being yourself."
It's about letting them do that.

After all, you live in God's house,
who has given you the run of the place.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes *Unfolding Light*
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