

A parrot walks into a bar and asks the bartender, "Do you have any grapes?" The bartender says no and the parrot leaves. The next day the parrot returns and asks, "Do you have any grapes?" The bartender again says no and the parrot departs. Two days later the parrot returns walks up to the bar and asks the bartender, "Do you have any grapes?" The bartender, losing his patience, screams at the parrot, "I told you parrot, I don't have any grapes and if you ask me again I will nail your feet to the floor!" The parrot looks startled and goes out. A couple of days later the parrot returns walks up to the bar and asks, "Do you have any nails?" The bartender replied, "No," and the parrot said, "Good! Got any grapes?"

This story rings almost true because Radar, my own parrot for 26 years, was a grape lover. It's difficult to tell if he laughed at my grape joke because parrot humour is hard to read. While the prophet Ezekiel did not make his living as a biblical humorist, he did make use of a well-known proverb about grapes: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. Ezekiel 18:2" The meaning of the proverb is that the children pay for the sins of their parents, reflecting a theological view that sin is not just something that happens in our individual lives, but that it runs so deeply as to taint us and the generations that follow us. In that sense the proverb is not far from modern family systems therapy, in which we know that certain behaviors run in families. Healing an individual sometimes requires healing a whole family system because the problem is engrained in several generations. A misapplication of the insight would be that we can blame all our negative characteristics on our parents and accept no responsibility for our own growth.

Ezekiel is aware of the potential for people to blame their ancestors for their misfortunes and so he says, "As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. **Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.**" [Ezekiel 18:3-4]." In other words, Ezekiel declares God's intent that responsibility for our sins lies within our own lives, not in our ancestors. We are the ones who are responsible not to worship idols, covet another's wife or oppress anyone. We are to give bread to the hungry, clothe the naked and execute true justice in our dealings with people. It is for failing to do these things that we should be judged, not for our ancestors' conduct. Ezekiel articulates God's justice so that people know that their God is a just God who expects them to live justly too. Ezekiel lays out the prophetic understanding of life in which honouring God's will, not advancing self-interest, is our true nature and calling.

One of the distinctive features of living in the kingdom of God is that loving God and neighbour as one's self implies a gracious acceptance of everyone as neighbour. Jesus makes this point in the Good Samaritan parable in which a man stops to help someone in need at the side of the road, showing love for the injured man as his neighbour, even though he does not actually know him. The apostle Paul echoes this theme in Hebrews 13:1-2, part of the lectionary we didn't read in our service: "**Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.**" When kindness flows from our own ego we find it easy to help those whom we approve of, those who share our values or those who look and dress like us. When confronted with someone in need who does not fit our usual standard of acceptance, it may be more difficult to see that stranger as "an angel."

When I was younger and first heard Paul's words about entertaining angels unawares, I thought in terms of trying to **recognize unlikely strangers** as potential angels. Was it the pan handler? The lonely man on the park bench? The woman screaming obscenities at no one in particular, on a downtown street? It did not occur to me that I might be the recipient of God's

graciousness – befriended in a foreign land. My experience happened forty-some years ago in Norway, while I was overseas on a work exchange program. I had finished my summer job at a hospital in Stockholm and I bought a train ticket that got me as far as Narvik, on the northern coast of Norway. Since I had just turned twenty-one, I had all the confidence in the world. I assumed that although my travel money had run out in the far reaches of Norway, I would simply hitch hike back to Stockholm, befriended all along the way by kindly Vikings. In reality, I ended up stranded on the side of a country road in the cold rain. And the rain did not let up. Eventually I came to a farmhouse and knocked on the door. The elderly couple spoke no English, so we relied on sign language and my few words of Swedish. Out came the tea pot and slices of brown goat cheese on crackers. When they found out that I was Canadian they asked if I knew their daughter in Vancouver? She had immigrated to Canada years before and was well received there. Even if I didn't know her it was clear that I should be outfitted with dry socks and a bag of sandwiches for travel. My Norwegian hosts had taught me that it wasn't necessary to discern which stranger was an angel and which wasn't, but that every stranger is potentially an angel worthy of gracious hospitality... even lost Canadians.

Strangers who are foreigners are the litmus test of our hospitality. Hospitality could be an issue of life or death in the harsh conditions of ancient Palestine. Jesus pushes the envelope of how far one must go to practise a hospitality of Godly graciousness. In a parable he depicts a marriage scene in which some of the guests presume to choose the place of honour at the banquet table. He suggests that it is wise to choose a humble place, so that the host will invite you to sit at a higher place, rather than for you to choose a place of honour and be displaced by the host, in favour of someone more deserving. Is it not our middle-class prerogative to believe that we are *deserving* of the place we have chosen? We believe that we are deserving of our affluence, our security, our status. Perhaps we even believe that the things we have are a sign of God's blessing. In contrast, Jesus comments on the parable of the wedding guests this way: **"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,"** [Luke 14:11.] His point is that we are all dependent on God's gracious hospitality, even if we think we have earned God's favour by asserting our status.

Jesus adds a second teaching on hospitality. Luke reports that Jesus said to the ruler who had invited him, **"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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous,"** (14:12-14) This kind of sharing-hospitality is what happens at Our Place in downtown Victoria. There are also other ways of extending our hospitality collectively that ministers to the needs of the marginalized and the outsiders. We used to do an Inner City Dinner on a monthly basis, inviting in whoever would like to come. This summer we hosted a neighbourhood barbeque for three Wednesdays, in which invited not those who could repay us, but those open to entering into hospitality with one another. It is an intimate kind of hospitality to sit at table with people who may appear very different from us. Yet it is better to err on the side of doing something flawed but caring, than to withdraw into our own safe space. We can further sort out how to create a space that is both open and safe for those who are most vulnerable, when accessing our hospitality.

God notices whom we invite in. Jesus invites in all manner of people to show how wide the kingdom of God is. As Paul advises us, we may entertain angels unawares. The Good News is that God's graciousness is abundant and we are enabled to receive and to give such love abundantly. Thanks be to God for inviting us in. Amen.