

A Surprising Guest
7th Sunday after Trinity
Hebrews 13:1 – 6



Sacrifices Pleasing to God

1Let brotherly love continue. 2Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. 3Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. 4Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. 5Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." 6So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

As a child, I was always especially excited when we had guests. My brothers and I would stare at them wide-eyed, practically devouring them with our gaze—driven by sheer curiosity. One of our special guests was a missionary. To be honest, he was the first real missionary I had ever met in person. He was an imposing figure, standing at least two meters tall. His black clothing and wide-brimmed hat added to the aura of mystery that surrounded him. Since his auto repair shop was just 500 meters from our house—and his car frequently broke down—he would spend hours at our place while his vehicle was being fixed. He would often sit perfectly still and bolt upright in his chair, saying nothing at all. Yet, at times, he would share stories about his experiences in a concentration camp in India. It was far more captivating than the movies, and I hungrily absorbed every word he spoke. Much later, when the missionary was elderly and frail, I heard that he used to travel from congregation to congregation completely unannounced. He was looking for a place to sleep, certainly, but he also had a strong desire to preach. One pastor's wife recounted how he once appeared at their door in the middle of the night, drenched by the rain. Water was literally streaming off his wide-brimmed hat... and, without even a greeting, he simply announced: "I need to preach here tomorrow!" These surprise visits didn't always come at convenient times, of course, and hosts weren't always thrilled to take in such an eccentric guest. Yet, they did it anyway! And the question remains: Why? In my family, the answer was simple. Everyone knew the missionary in black, so inviting him in and looking after him was a matter of course. But when he showed up unannounced—a dark, rain-soaked figure wanting to preach—things became a bit more complicated. But even then, it was possible to clarify who this missionary was; very often, not only was he welcomed into the home, but he was also allowed to fulfill his wish and preach. And the reason was the knowledge that we belonged to the same family. How should we understand this? In my family home, there is a family tree, and at the very top is a picture of my great-great-grandparents. We are descended from those two people. We are all one family stemming from them. Yet the same could not be said of the missionary dressed in black, for he did not appear on my family tree. And yet, he was welcomed as if he belonged to that tree; he was treated just like a family member. The reason is the same: We belong to one family!

We, too, have a root and a family tree, and that family tree begins with Jesus. Through Jesus, Christians all over the world share a history and a destiny. Through Jesus, we have been baptized—united in one baptism—and thus incorporated into the one Body of Christ. We have been buried with Christ and will rise again with him. Through Jesus, then, we are one family. There is no closer bond possible.

Just as I inherited specific traits from my great-grandparents, I have also inherited specific traits from our Lord Jesus. And time and again, I continue not only to inherit qualities from him but also to find my identity in him. This remains true even though Jesus lived long ago and is not part of my biological family.

Through Jesus, I am simultaneously connected and related to all Christians across the globe. They come from vastly different backgrounds: some from China, others from Iran, still others from America, Germany, and many other countries. Yet, through Jesus Christ, we are one family and belong together. The Letter to the Hebrews seeks to remind us Christians of this family. It was particularly important to do so at that time because Christians were facing severe persecution. The community had been torn apart by that persecution. Many were in prison, and even more had died. In such a situation, one had to be careful not to let enemies into one's home who might betray the community. Consequently, mistrust spread, for one could not simply welcome everyone into one's house. Indeed, Christians were sometimes turned away because there was uncertainty about whether they were truly genuine. Yet such a mindset is disastrous for the Christian church. That is why the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts: "Let brotherly

love continue." Do not let the world tear you apart! Many had also grown weary in their faith. For this reason, the Letter to the Hebrews must remind us of who we are. It is well worth reading the entire Letter to the Hebrews, for it portrays the greatness of Christ in vivid detail. Christ is the greater Moses, and the entire Old Testament temple serves as a foreshadowing of the once-for-all sacrifice of our Lord Jesus. This Jesus is the origin and source of our identity. In Chapter 13, the author of Hebrews speaks of the very practical implications we experience in daily life through our connection with Jesus. And it is precisely here that Christian love and hospitality take center stage.

It is all too human to focus on what the eye can see. It is all too human, then, to seek out those who are like us—people with whom we feel at ease and with whom we share the same language and culture. Moreover, our society offers many interests that lie outside the church. People meet in a wide variety of circles and social hubs; the church is rarely one of these meeting places or interest groups anymore. All these things shape our identity, causing us to quickly forget our true roots in Christ and pursue only the things we find appealing or interesting. And when a church comprises many different people with an even wider array of interests, the congregation can easily drift from its center in Christ toward the periphery, where everyone pursues their own agenda. We move away from Christ—our center—and in doing so, we also drift away from our fellow church members, until the day comes when we ask ourselves: "Why am I even a member of the church?"

Before we are forced to face that question, we should ask ourselves now: "What do we actually get out of church? And why am I here?" This question is not easily answered, because we cannot see it all immediately—at least not with our physical eyes. Perhaps I can begin by recounting the story to which the Letter to the Hebrews alludes when it says: "...thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The story recalled by the Letter to the Hebrews (see Genesis 18) tells how Abraham was roused from his midday nap by three unexpected guests. Without hesitation, Abraham invites them in and offers them a meal. That was a common practice in those days; that is how everyone did things. Yet what Abraham did not know was that God Himself, accompanied by two angels, was visiting him. All of this was revealed to him only later. It is much the same in the Christian community. We gather here every Sunday. We are ordinary people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. We all share from the same cup and partake of the same Body of Christ during the Lord's Supper. Yet all of this is merely what is visible to the eye. In reality, Christ Himself is present behind these things. Also hidden from our sight are the angels in heaven who rejoice over us—rejoicing that we are here, rejoicing that we confess our sins, and rejoicing that we are able to live through Christ.

All of this has a profound impact on our lives as a whole. In Chapter 13, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks explicitly about marriage and the love of money. It exhorts us to keep the marriage bed undefiled. Indeed, the early Christian church differed sharply from the surrounding culture regarding marriage and sexuality. Contemporaries found this both peculiar and fascinating. I am struck by the similarities today: when a couple marries and sincerely believes—and vows—that marriage is for a lifetime, we often face curious questions: "So, are you not allowed to get divorced?" This presents a tremendous opportunity. In a society where trust has eroded and foundations are wavering, a lifelong marriage can serve as a powerful testimony to the world around us.

The second exhortation in the Letter to the Hebrews concerns money. It is important to note that neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor anyone else in the Bible states that being wealthy is inherently wrong. However, it is said that the desire or craving to be rich carries the danger that we might love these things more than God. The Letter to the Hebrews urges us, rather than craving money, to recognize the presence of our Lord in our daily lives—quoting from Joshua 1 and Psalm 118:

"I will never leave you nor forsake you." "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us Christians to live with the awareness of Christ's presence within us. It tells us, in essence, simply this: God is here! Jesus is here! Jesus is in your marriage! Jesus is in your career! Jesus is even in your financial planning! Jesus is present throughout your entire life. Jesus is present even where people are being persecuted and thrown into prison. He is there even with the dying. Jesus holds our hands and unites us all!

Back then, as I sat at the feet of the missionary dressed in black, hanging on his every word, I had no idea that I would one day become a missionary myself. Even less did I imagine that I would someday work in the very congregation that this man in black had founded. But that is how things go: we do not always know whom we are hosting—and above all, not why. But God knows! Amen.