Their son, a junior in high school, arrived home at seven following football practice. The family sat down for dinner and a moment after his sister finished saying grace, he shared what was on his mind. His friend, Doug, the team’s outstanding lineman, had a problem. Doug’s mother, a single mom, had landed a good full time job, but it was the night shift. She did not want Doug home alone five nights a week. Their son asked, “Could Doug live with us on weekday nights? He would be with his mom on weekends.”

His parents did not hesitate. “Sure,” they said, “Tell Doug we would love to have him.”

Doug moved in and it worked out beautifully. Doug was on the same schedule as their son and he did not present any behavior problems. But about a month into this arrangement, the family received a plea from a friend who is a social worker. A mother and her two children were suddenly homeless after fleeing an abusive husband. They were desperate for a place to stay.

“Sure we can help,” the mom and dad said; and that afternoon they added three more to their home, a family from the country of Surinam.

That evening when their son and Doug arrived home after football practice, they were introduced to the new guests. The family from Surinam was very shy and wondered how they would be received. Dinner was ready so the family of four plus Doug, plus the mother plus her two young children stood in the kitchen. The parents explained to their new guests that they prayed before dinner and they stood in a circle in the kitchen and reached out to hold one another’s hands. Before one of the parents could begin to pray, Doug, 6’4” 250-pound defensive tackle, towering over these tiny people from a far-away land, broke out in a large grin and belted out, “We are the world, we are the children!”

Extending hospitality is a core value in the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Today’s brief passage from the Letter to the Hebrews begins the final chapter which provides instructions for living the Christian life.

Summarizing what he wrote earlier, the author writes, “Let mutual love continue.” He reminds those within the household of faith it is imperative to love each other. Then, he immediately turns from how they are to treat one another to how they are to treat outsiders. He says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” He is alluding to the story in Genesis when Abraham and Sarah extend hospitality to three strangers who turn out to be messengers of God. That story provides the basis in
Judaism for providing hospitality. You welcome strangers because you never know who they might be. They could be undercover agents of God in disguise.

For Muslims, hospitality is a sacred duty. The prophet Muhammad said, “Let the believer in Allah and Day of Judgment honor his neighbor. Let the believer in Allah and the Day of Judgment honor his guest.” Camilla and I have been fortunate to experience the generous hospitality for which Arabs are famous when we have travelled in East Jerusalem, Lebanon and Jordan.

Christians are encouraged to extend hospitality not only in this passage in Hebrews, and in Paul’s letter to the Christian community in Rome, but Jesus says to his disciples, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” (Matthew 10:40) And to those who are faithful and true, Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35)

Jesus is talking about the manner in which we receive someone. How do you receive someone who is a good friend? With a handshake? A warm embrace? A kiss?

What does it mean to genuinely welcome someone? It means to have an attitude within you that recognizes the other not merely as an object, but a fellow traveler; someone who has a unique history, special gifts and personal feelings.

For 1500 years, the Rule of Benedict has served as the basic set of principles for every Benedictine monastery and convent in the world. Its wisdom has weathered the ages because it provides such helpful instruction for living the Christian life.

Chapter 66 of the Rule of Benedict describes the role of the Porter of the monastery, the one who answers the door. Not a big deal, anyone can do that, right? Absolutely not.

There are qualifications. Benedict advises that this person should be “a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and how to deliver a reply.”

The Porter is the face of the monastery. For many, he will be the first impression people have of the community and he could be the first impression people have of monks in general. So the Porter is given specific instructions. His room is to be near the entrance so that when visitors knock on the door, he will be able to respond quickly. As soon as someone knocks, the Porter is to reply, “Thanks be to God” or “Your blessing, please” and he is to respond with the warmth of love. He is to do that before he has any clue as to who is standing on the other side of the door.

Chapter 53 of the Rule of Benedict says that the greatest care must be given when receiving the poor or pilgrims, “because it is especially in them that Christ is received.”

In the First Letter of John, we read the short, simple, yet deeply profound phrase: “God is love.” (1 John 4:16) I suspect we will never grasp the full meaning of that statement, but it means at least that God is the origin of love and the energy of love. Love does not exist apart from God so anyone who loves, whether they know it or not, is being touched by the divine Spirit. Further, love is not flat and lifeless. It is an active and compelling force that shapes and transforms.

The statement, God is love, is followed by these words: “those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” That is, when you love you are tapping into the divine Spirit that dwells within you. Like a battery that
has energy stored within it, but does not release the energy until it is tapped, God’s love resides within you waiting to be utilized.

This idea alone is more than enough to contemplate. *God’s love resides within you waiting to be tapped.* But we are driven to add: when you love, you are connecting to God’s Spirit so that it can emerge from within and reach out to another.

The image of God that is deep within us seeks the image of God in others. Although we often feel fragmented – our attention and energy pulled in many different directions – we have a longing to be whole. Like an unfinished musical score that begs to be completed, we have an internal urge to be complete. We experience that feeling of completeness, wholeness, fulfillment when the spark of God within us connects with the spark of God in another.

But, if this is what we yearn to experience, then why aren’t we constantly connecting with others on more than a surface level? Could it be fear? We fear the stranger. We fear the unknown. We fear being harmed. We fear being rejected. Love enriches our lives, igniting feelings of joy and hope, but love is also risky. It makes us vulnerable, so we become wary of drawing to close.

Another way we stifle the image of God within us is by becoming so full of ourselves that we crowd out room for another. I doubt anyone thinks of himself as arrogant, but there are times that all of us act as if we can be whole independent of others. We forget that God has created an interconnected universe where nothing exists in isolation. It is an allusion to see ourselves as separate and distinct individuals who are unconnected and unrelated. When we act as if we are not all children of God – one family, brothers and sisters of each other – we skew our connection to God and our bond with others. Like a faint radio signal that keeps breaking up, we distort the image of God within us which mangles our relationships.

While Martin Copenhaver was in seminary he was driving in Connecticut with a couple of friends when his car broke down. This was before cell phones. His car had broken down and “he needed a phone so he walked to the nearest house and knocked on the door. He could hear a lot of conversation and laughter coming from the house. The man who opened the door – who had never seen him before – did not step outside to speak with him. He did not stand in the doorway while Martin stood outside. Instead, his first words to Martin were, ‘Please come in.’”

Martin was surprised. The man “did not know him and did not know why he was there, but he immediately said, ‘Please come in.’ Martin was taken aback, but he stepped into the house and told the man about his car problem. The man let him use his phone and when he finished the call, Martin thanked him. The man asked how long it would be before the road service truck would arrive. ‘They said about half an hour.’”

The man responded, “Well, then, you might as well join the party. Can I get you a glass of wine?” Martin was grateful but he had two friends waiting for him back at the car. The man said, “Bring them in!” So Martin and his friends joined the party.

In half an hour, Martin met the road service mechanic at his car and it wasn’t long before his car was ready. Martin went back to the house to thank the man for his kindness, but the man said, “Please stay for dinner.” And Martin noticed his friends already had plates in their hands.

Martin said, “It was as if we were expected all along. That was 30 years ago, but you don’t forget a welcome like that.”

What if we approached our relationships with others – loved ones, friends, mere acquaintances and strangers – like the Porter in a Benedictine monastery? “Thanks be to God!” Or, what if we received each person as if he/she might be a divine messenger? “Your blessing, please.”
When Laura Mendenhall was installed as a pastor at Central Presbyterian Church in Austin they had a grand worship service. Following the service, everyone went to their fellowship hall to enjoy a feast. As people were taking their seats, a stranger appeared and sat down at the head table, claiming a seat among the guests of honor. He was a disturbed, unkempt, and smelly street person who had slipped in. As he claimed his special seat, an indignant church officer said, “Who in the world is that filthy man?” To which another church elder snapped back, “He’s probably Jesus.”

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that you may entertain angels without knowing it.”

NOTES

3. Story told by Dean Thompson when Laura Mendenhall was installed as Associate Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas.

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ~ Randall T. Clayton**

O God, creator of all – animals, plants, earth and sky, and people too. In this divided and conflict-ridden world, we join brothers and sisters around the globe this day praying for peace on this International Day of Prayer for Peace. Violence here in our own country and all across the globe destroys peoples and communities. Violence in homes destroys hope and health. Violence against earth and sky destroys not just animals but the harmony and future of all creation. And so, O God, we pray for peace. Let your Spirit fill us with the ability and the desire to reach across divides, to create understanding, to embrace differences. And as we pray for peace this day, we remember the prince of peace, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying…

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.