

Pentecost 14
Proper 17C

August 29, 2010
THE Rev. Sandra Stayner

[Hummingbirds and Hospitality]

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1-14

We have a beautiful big deck at the back of our house in Hamden, which is absolutely beautiful at this time of year. It is dripping with flowers, which hang from pots standing on the deck as well as on steps, and ledges that surround the deck. We have small bushes and trees, herbs in pots, climbing vines of honeysuckle and little apple trees with big red apples hanging on their branches. We even have a small birdbath nestled by the side of the rosemary. At night the smell of gardenia is absolutely gorgeous. When I get home from work I love to go outside, watch the birds and let the beautiful perfumes waft into my senses. Right now the lobelia plants are

covered with bees busily collecting their nectar. As I rested on the fence surrounding the deck yesterday I noticed a butterfly sunning its wings on an apple core that must have been discarded by one of the many squirrels that live around here.

But the most exciting thing I have noticed this year is a pair of humming birds that visit our deck every morning and evening, seeming to visit every flower with their long curved beaks.

After feeding they rest on a special branch of an apple tree that sits on the deck. Amazingly when the little hummingbird is sitting on its favorite branch its body is almost invisible against the branches while its little green wings are exactly the same shape as the leaves in the tree. The little bird is perfectly camouflaged.

We nearly didn't buy our house because when we arrived the deck was painted bright white with a big white fence round the yard. The lawn was mowed to perfection, and covered with

pesticide so no weeds could spoil the effect. There were no bees or birds, or butterflies in sight. The whole back yard was sterile. David, the gardener knew it would take years of hard work to turn it into the thriving, life-filled place it is today. If we wanted the birds and butterflies to be a part of our lives, we would have to create a place where they would feel at home. Butterfly bushes, honeysuckle, flowering plants and finally a hummingbird feeder were an invitation to all living creatures to come and find a home for themselves on our deck. We enjoy their presence immensely.

Providing hospitality for birds and bees and butterflies means offering them flowers for food, bushes and trees for shelter and camouflage and space where they can be everything God created them to be. Hospitality to fellow humans is actually no different.

The practice of hospitality was central to Jesus' life and mission. He came into the world as a refugee with no place to lay his head. He depended on those around him to provide food and shelter as he traveled around teaching and healing the sick and the blind. Much of his ministry was done around the table in someone's home. And he was constantly pushing the conventional understanding of hospitality as he healed the sick on the Sabbath, ate with tax collectors and sinners and encouraged his disciples to offer a place of welcome to those who were outside their usual sphere of welcome. "When you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

(Luke 14:12-14) Over and over again Jesus insisted that it was those in need, the poor and the outcast who should be invited to God's Table. Later Jesus told his followers that as they fed

poor and clothed the needy it was as if they were doing it to Christ himself.

As the early Church struggled to find its way in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection love and care for any who chose to join them was a central part of their practice. They were known for the love and concern they showed all people, regardless of their status in life. News about the radical hospitality shown to needy strangers by the early church soon spread and people flocked to join them. (Which by the way, sometimes caused problems for the neophyte communities of faith who found an ever-increasing need for their resources.) In the fourth century, John Chrysostom urged his parishioners to "offer hospitality personally with their own hands and from their own homes. For him hospitality was an essential part of Christian identity, a wonderful conduit of blessing and

transformation, and a practical blessing. “ Building a Place for Hospitality by Christine D. Pohr.

Several years ago I became aware that Matt’s cello teacher was living on a friend’s couch because she didn’t have anywhere to stay when she came to New Haven. We immediately asked her to come and stay in our spare bedroom. We didn’t ask her for rent or to pay for her food because she obviously couldn’t afford it. She lived with us for the rest of the year and what a blessing it was for us to have her with us. Even now we stay in touch though she has long gone on to greater things. I think also of the many new people who have joined St. Peter’s. I won’t embarrass them by name but it is easy to see what great blessings this community has received at the hands of the people who have come lately.

Of course, making a home for people to come takes time just as it took time for David to build a hospitable place for the birds and bees who now inhabit our deck. It is all very well to offer a guest a room for the night but providing a place where they can live until they get on their feet is a much larger commitment - yet one in which both guests and recipients are blessed.

I hope our community is the kind of place people of all kinds can find a home and a place of belonging, a place where they will not be judged but a place where they can experience Christ's love firsthand. Hospitality doesn't just happen.

Welcoming people who come to check out Christ's table is something we all have to be involved in. I can't possibly be sure that every person who walks through our door is welcomed to the Lord's table. Creating a place where strangers can find a home takes much more than just saying "hello, we're

glad you're here." It means finding that person the next time they come, and the next and the next – taking responsibility to walk by the side of the one who came as a stranger until they find friends, and a place where they "fit". It may also mean inviting them to your home to share a meal, because it is round a table that deep friendships are often forged. Welcoming strangers into Christ's presence may also mean including people who are not the same as you, people you wouldn't normally invite to your home or wish to spend time with. In the end you may well find that they are the people from whom you will receive the greatest blessing.

Let us begin this new academic year by treating every new person we meet at school, on the street, in church, or in our neighborhood as if they were Christ, for many have entertained angels unawares.