

**“Where is the Lord?”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, September 1, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 & Jeremiah 2:4-13 & Luke 14:1, 7-14**

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.//

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.  
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Will you pray with me. God of great hospitality, hover over us as we look for you among the strangers who come to our doors and in the doubtful stranger who lives within us when all is not going well. Help us to know your presence in good times and in bad, in plenty and in want, and in the midst of our faith and our faithlessness. Amen.

Love, hospitality, angels, justice, morality, ethics, and doing good for others! Our text from Hebrews for today covers just about the whole ball of wax of life! We like all of those concepts! They make us feel good, unless we’re on the wrong side of them! From my time so far with you here in Thomaston, it seems to me you live out the positive side of those concepts pretty well.

The passage from Hebrews for today “summarizes key messages for the fledgling Christian community [of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, those who didn’t know Jesus personally, but who wanted to keep the faith he taught and lived out.] What does it mean to be the church? How should Christians behave in difficult times? [The writer of Hebrews says] show love for other members of the Christian family and show love to strangers and guests. Remember those suffering in prison. Be faithful in marriage. Keep free from the love of money. Be content. Do good to others and share.”<sup>1</sup>

Wonderful and lofty and simple sounding things to do! But we all know they are not easy to do. We try to love one another and strangers and guests, but sometimes we don’t. They might want something from us we don’t want to give them.

We try to remember those who are in prison, prison of all kinds, but sometimes it’s just too painful to think about “those people.”

And that marriage thing – it’s great when it works. But sometimes it doesn’t. Lots of marriages end in divorce, sometimes two or three times.

And that money thing. We don’t think about that, do we? And we are content, aren’t we?

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<sup>1</sup>From *Seasons of the Spirit Congregational life* for Sunday, September 2, 2007, p. 16.

We do good to and for others and share, except if it gets a little too close to home. I NEED all those sweaters and tee shirts in my drawers, I can't give them away to someone who has no clothes!

And my spare guest bedroom, I might need it for a relative or a friend, I can't offer it to a perfect stranger who needs a place to stay for a little while. I'm only speaking for myself, of course....

We didn't hear the passage from the Gospel of Luke assigned for this Sunday, but it reminds us, too, that Jesus taught that humility means we don't always sit in "our" pew, we don't just talk to those we know and understand, we don't only associate with those who can reciprocate our hospitality.

Jesus teaches hospitality which extends itself to those we'll never know, and maybe never receive a thank you from, or extend to us a reciprocal invitation. Hospitality can be a one way street. But as the words from Mother Teresa told us in our responsive reading, "be hospitable.... anyway. Do it, anyway...."

Do it, without any expectation of a thank you, or a reciprocal good deed toward us.... because you never know.... when you might be entertaining an angel in disguise.... I often wonder if we would recognize Jesus if he showed up right now....

I think of that when I see a homeless person standing on a street corner, usually in Portland rather than here, while I wait for the light to turn green so I can move on.... avoiding those searching eyes behind the ragged cardboard poster he, or she, is holding which says, "I'm homeless and hungry. Anything you can give will help."

I hate that! You never know when it's all a scam and they're not homeless at all, but just looking to take advantage of my generosity and soft heart.... You can't be too sure nowadays of who's really in need and who isn't.

"Where is the Lord" in all of this? That's the question from the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament text we didn't read from this morning's lectionary selections.

Where is the Lord today, in the midst of all the angst and chaos and tragedy reported on our little "smart boxes" each morning?

Where is the Lord when the baby dies, horrific murders take place, hurricanes and other natural disasters ravage the landscape, and leaders in business, politics and sports rip apart the moral fiber of our country? It's tough some days to see any signs of angels in our midst when the daily news paints such a terrible picture of life gone awry.

Where is the Lord when bad things happen to good people? Where is the Lord when death comes too soon or after a painful ending later in life? Rabbi Earl Grollman wrote in his book *Living When A Loved One Has Died*, "When death comes, life is examined."<sup>2</sup> When death comes, life IS examined. And often the question that comes in that examination is "Where is the Lord?" "How could the God whom I believe in let this happen?"

I'm supposed to have answers to these questions – I'm a minister, for God's sake, for GOD'S sake. And yet, the answer I have doesn't seem very satisfying or comforting, even to me – God doesn't cause senseless deaths to occur, people driving recklessly do. People with guns do. People with no concern for others do. People who abuse alcohol

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<sup>2</sup>Earl Grollman, *Living When A Loved One Has Died*, Boston: Beacon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1995, p. 40.

and drugs do. People who live as if they are invincible do. People who live as if death is impossible do. People who live as if God doesn't exist do.

Jeremiah speaks for God and says, "my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." (Jer 2:13) Many people live even now as if they were in total control – of their cars, their cares, their cures, even their lives. Pretty soon, leaks begin to appear in their wells. They may even run dry. In times of tragedy we thirst for living water and cry out, either silently or aloud, "Where is the Lord?"

It is not unusual for people to do one of two things when tragedy strikes – they either turn AWAY from God, believing that if God existed such tragedy wouldn't occur; or they turn TO God because they cannot bear the tragedy alone or because someone appears or something happens to bring them face to face with God, the fountain of living water. I fall into that latter category, having had experiences related to my parents' deaths that led me to open my eyes and see God in those around me who cared for me and shared their faith with me in ways I could never have imagined.

Our scripture passage from the book of Hebrews this morning talks about caring and sharing faith – that IS hospitality, and doing good, and sharing what we have with others. The author of Hebrews writes, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Heb 13:1-2)

This is another of my favorite passages of scripture because it points to the surprises that make faith come alive. It also points to the critical importance of opening ourselves up to what might be hard to do – stepping in where we could feel embarrassed for not remembering someone's name, stepping in where we might be rebuffed for unwanted attention, stepping in for God where God has not been able to get a foot in the door before

For in opening *our* doors and *our* lives to those whom we believe are strangers, we find unexpected companions – people who have struggled and lost and experienced pain and grieved just as we have. "Where is the Lord?"

The Lord is in the stranger who appears at the door of the church.

The Lord is in the parent who comforts another parent who has lost a child.

The Lord is in the friend who lets us cry and cries with us.

The Lord is in the friend who laughs with us at our mistakes and our shortcomings.

The Lord is in the midst of our tragedies, our joys and our relationships with others.

The Lord is wherever we look and see that our own reflection is not enough to see us through grief and loss.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." (Heb 13:16) May the good you do and the sharing you extend bring you closer to God and to one another.

Let the people say, "Amen." Let us prepare to receive the Lord's Supper.