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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
New Testament Lesson: Genesis 18:1-5

Charles Colson tells of a rivalry between the young people of Shively Christian Church and their counterparts at Shively Baptist in Louisville, KY.¹ The competition was especially fierce in softball.

One week, the Christian Church youth minister shared a Bible lesson on Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13). He divided the youth into groups and asked them to go out and find a practical way to be servants. He challenged them, saying, “If Jesus were here, what would he do?”

Two hours later the kids returned to report on their activities. One group did yard work for an elderly man. Another brought ice cream to several widows from their church. Another group took a get well card to a church member in the hospital. Some of the youth went Christmas caroling at a nursing home even though it was mid-August.

But when the fifth group reported on their activity, everyone else groaned. This group from the Christian Church went to the pastor of their rival church, Shively Baptist, and asked him if he knew someone who needed help. The pastor sent them to the home of an elderly woman who needed help with yard work. They mowed, raked and trimmed hedges.

As they were leaving, the woman called them together and thanked them. “You kids at Shively Baptist are always coming to our rescue,” she told them. “Shively Baptist!” said their youth pastor. “I sure hope you set her straight and told her you were from Shively *Christian* Church.” “Why, no, we didn’t,” they replied. “We didn’t think it mattered.”

Today we begin a sermon series titled “Please God.” If we spent half as much time asking what would please God as we do asking God to please us, we would have a life of love, freedom, vision, and contentment.

Love, freedom, vision, and contentment – these are divine blessings, which the writer of Hebrews points to in the scripture passage we just heard read.

¹ “It really didn’t matter” reprinted in *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul* (Deerfield Beach, Fla: Health Communications, Inc.), 82-3. (Originally printed in *The Body* (Dallas: Word, Inc., 1992).

In the coming weeks, we will return to this scripture passage, looking at each one of these divine blessings and how to cultivate them in our lives, beginning with the blessing that comes from living a life of Christian love.

As the youth of Shively Christian Church so beautifully demonstrated, Christian love – love for our fellow human beings – does not care who gets the credit. Those who live from a place of Christian love know that it's about God, not them – not their bragging rights and not their need to feel pleased with themselves. It's about living a life that is pleasing to God.

The scripture verses we are focusing on today are where Hebrews says, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

By strangers, Hebrews is referring to those whom we would call visitors – people who visit our churches or our families or schools or workplaces in need of Christian love and acceptance.

Christianity is a shared faith, and one of the best ways we share the faith is by extending welcome and hospitality. (There are others, such as providing Christian care and concern, which we'll look at next week.) But for today, it's all about showing the love of Christ through genuine welcome and gracious hospitality.

The problem with showing the love of Christ through genuine welcome and gracious hospitality is that sometimes we get burned in the process. For instance, we might get taken advantage of.

We might invite someone into the Parlour for coffee and cookies who has no interest in our worship service or community of faith. No big deal. That's fine. But what if that person also takes the opportunity to ask each and everyone one who's there for money?

We have no idea what this person's situation is. We don't know if he or she is going to use that money to get on a solid foundation (which would be great to be a part of) or to hit the nearest bar.

What should we do? That's the tough position we're put in as Christians. And it's not just at church. We face the same question of how best to show Christian hospitality, welcome and love at work and at school, in our homes, and on the street corner.

You may have heard this before, but there was one time when a big, burly man visited a certain pastor's home – and not this certain pastor – and he asked to see the minister's wife. She was a woman well known for her charitable deeds. "Madam," he said in a broken voice, "I wish to draw your attention to the terrible plight of a poor family in this neighborhood. The father is dead, the mother is too ill to work, and the nine children are starving.

They are about to be turned out onto the cold, empty streets unless someone pays their rent, which amounts to \$400.” “How terrible!” exclaimed the preacher’s wife. “May I ask who you are?” The sympathetic visitor pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed the tears from his eyes, and said, “I am the landlord.”

To help or not to help, that is the question. In answering that question – in praying about it whenever we are faced with a visitor or stranger in need – it helps to weigh the risks against the benefits.

The benefits are that we actually could be “entertaining (an angel) without knowing it” – someone sent to us from God. The risk is we often don’t know for sure. We often don’t know whether our encounter with someone is part of God’s plan or is this someone who has wandered off the path God has in mind. The world is full of misguided people, and people who would actively lead others astray.

So if it’s not one of God’s angel or God’s faithful standing before us, we run the risk of being taken advantage of, or of being led astray, or of just not knowing and feeling bad for not helping. I think many of you have been in that situation, not knowing if it’s the right thing to do; I know I have.

Is that a risk worth taking? It depends. It depends on whether you can afford to be taken advantage of, whether you are strong enough to not be led astray, and whether you have faith enough to help or not help, without really knowing the outcome.

If it’s just a matter of risking our wealth, then the response that is most pleasing to God is for us to help. If, on the other hand, we are being led astray, that’s another matter. God does not want us to be led astray. And that’s why it is so important to have enough faith to either help or to not help depending on your best judgment and most searching prayer.

After all, when you “show hospitality to strangers,” as Hebrews puts it, you will have done the best you could do. Be OK with that. Or if you don’t help – because you just know in your heart of hearts that you would be enabling someone in their misguided ways – be OK with that, also.

The truth is more often than not, you’ll never really know. But at least you will have done your best. God asks no more – and no less – than that – that we do what we can based on our best judgment and most searching prayer.

And it doesn’t matter if you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable trying to help someone. That doesn’t get us off the hook. After all, it’s about God, not us. God is the one in charge, and God will take our best efforts and use them to bless the lives of others. And in that, we ourselves, are blessed. We have the blessing of giving without judgment, of planting a seed of love and faith in the heart of another, of giving that person a sense of the joy and acceptance of the Lord. And, most of all, we have the blessing of having grown and stretched in our faith.

Look for that opportunity throughout the coming week. Look for that person God has put in your life with a need – maybe it's something as simple as a friendly smile for someone feeling lost or lonely, or something as great as actually giving of your time or money and trusting the outcome to God.

No matter what it is. Let us all be blessed to help at least one other person this week in some unexpected way that stretches our faith. If we do that, not only will that person be blessed, not only will we be blessed, but our faith tells us that untold others will be blessed by the witness of or the ripple effect from our simple act of loving kindness. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Oh God, how we love you! We do not say it enough. We love you.

We want our actions to demonstrate our love; we want our words to communicate our deep connection to you.

We love you because you first loved us. Thank you for showing us what true love is. We join in that love at this time, as we pray for ourselves and for others.

We pray for your love to rain down upon the friends and loved ones of Dick Falk. We pray for your spirit of healing for Pat Kelley and Fred Royal, and for all whom we know of and hold in prayer.

We pray, Lord, that our desires, our very being, be directed toward you, and that our lives never stop showing you how much we love you.

Receive our worship today as an outpouring of our love. We give all of this to you, and in the name and Spirit of your son, 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.**