

July 2, 2023

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson
Ministry of Hospitality

I studied abroad my junior year of college, the fall semester in London, England and then the spring semester in Regensburg, Germany

Ja, ich kann Deutsch sprechen, I weiß nicht ob ihr das kennt oder nicht?

When I was in London a few of my dearest friends studied there with me – it was a combined classroom and internship experience.

We had 4 weeks of intense classes and then we had a week off before starting local internships

During that week off, my friends and I decided to go as many places as we could and there was a cheap German airline called Ryanair that had a deal – free flights, you just had to pay the taxes

So we looked at a map of where those free flights would get us and figured out that we could make it to six major cities in seven days: Barcelona, Spain; Venice, Italy; Rome, Italy; Bratislava, Slovakia; Vienna, Austria; and finally, Salzburg, Austria

The day we were to leave, we left our student accommodations in London and trekked to the local tube stop to take the Circle Line to Paddington Station where we were going to take a train to Stansted Airport – the thing about Ryanair is that they flew out of the more obscure airports

We made it to our local Tube stop only to find that there was unexpected construction on the line that day

We had lined up our route so precisely that we were counting on that Tube train coming on time and getting us to the train station with some minutes to spare – but would we make it now?

We hailed a cab and asked the driver to take us to Paddington Station and told him the train time we had to catch

“You won’t make it” he said – we were crushed

Our seven major cities in six days adventure didn’t have room for missed flights – we were only in some cities a little more than 14 hours!

“where ya looking to go?” – “we need to get to Stansted Airport” we told him

After a few seconds and a rub of his jaw, he said: “I’m almost done with my shift and I live out there – why don’t I take you?”

“that’s awfully kind, but we can’t afford that”

What should have been an almost 200 pound trip was made for 90 quid

We caught our plane and our adventure began

That was the first of many angels we met on that trip

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40) Jesus said

God’s dialog with humans, at least a good portion of it that has been written down in our scriptures, carries this theme of hospitality often

A few weeks ago we heard the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming divine guests as they passed by

Today, we hear Jesus comforting and encouraging his disciples – reminding them that as his disciples they carry not just themselves into the

spaces and places they will go but, but they carry, they embody, the very essence of Christ themselves

So much of our ministry as Jesus' disciples is hospitality – bringing Christ into the presence of others by showing gestures of kindness, embodying empathy, modeling vulnerability

Like our cab driver in London

As the kids say these days: “not all heroes wear capes” – not all saints have halos

Although our next saint at least had a collar

When we arrived in Venice, we hustled onto a water taxi and if you've ever ridden in one perhaps yours too was packed to the gills

I and my travel backpack was squished up against a mother and daughter sitting in the seat in front of me, my friend Ted and his travel backpack was squished up against the father and another daughter in the other seat, and our friend Devin and his rolly-suitcase was nose to nose with a priest

It's hard not to make small talk when you're that intimately close to each other

In broken English the priest said “hello” and our friend Devin replied “hi”

“first time in Venice?” “yes, from here we go to Rome”

“I live in Rome, you want to meet the Pope?”

To which my very devout Catholic friend Ted swung his travel backpack into the face of the father in front of him enthusiastically yelling “yes! yes we do!”

When we got off the boat, we took down the Priest's telephone number and the next day we bought nicer clothes since we hadn't packed to meet the Pope

When we arrived in Rome, we called the priest and he gave us an entrance name and a person's name – Porto Praetorium was the door and I can't remember the person's name, but it was a priest in a long Cassock who took us to this beautiful room with white walls and a fireplace on either side – a photo of the new Pope, Benedict, hanging just above one of them

He returned not too long later with a small envelope in his hand, in the envelope were three tickets to go to the Pope's weekly audience in St. Peter's Square – along with hundreds of other observers

No, we did not *meet* the Pope – but he came awfully close to us in his little Pope-mobile as he drove through the square

That night, the priest we met on the boat in Venice took us out to dessert in the city

While none of us knew Italian and he knew very little English – we had an amazing time

“and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward” (Matthew 10:42)

Gestures of hospitality, expressions of welcome do not always have to be extravagant – sometimes just a simple cup of cool water

Debie Thomas writes: “the small gesture and the invisible kindness are what please God, who sees everything we do in secret. What is rewarded is the quiet, unglamorous meeting of basic human need. Why? Because it is in the offering of such simple, essential gifts that Jesus's kingdom announces itself. Jesus came to bring abundant life, and that life begins

with the most elemental of gestures. ‘Even a cup of cold water?’ Yes, even that.”¹

It was a cup of espresso I sought our second morning in Rome, the only city we spent a second day in

And Devin wanted a croissant

So we popped into a cafe close by to the apartment where we were staying

We were headed to the Colosseum that morning and to the other other Ancient Roman sites whereas the day before had been our Vatican day

We were debating how to get there – this was before the days of international phone service and google maps

We had a little paper map but we couldn’t agree on which direction we should hold it to figure out how to get there

a woman a bit further down the bar asks in a thick accent “Where are you trying to go?”

“The Colosseum” we respond

She finished her espresso with one final swig, placed her cup down on the counter and said “follow me”

So we did

She was an older woman, seemed to be of Somalian descent and spoke with a thick Italian accent when she did speak, which wasn’t very often

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2672-welcome-the-prophet>

Like little ducklings with our Mamma Duck leading the way, we followed her down alleys and around corners

abruptly, she came to a stop in the middle of a sidewalk and said “around that corner – have a nice day” and she walked away

we blinked a few times and then cautiously approached the corner, turned it, and came face to face with the Colosseum

She barely stayed long enough for us to thank her, but we tried to yell it as she walked briskly back down the street

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”

“this is a staggering claim” Debie Thomas continues. “What would happen if we took it seriously? Or even literally? How would our behaviors and attitudes change if we believed that other people see Jesus every time they look at us? What would happen to the Church and to the world if we operated on the assumption that Jesus is visible in and through us at every moment, in every interaction, in every relationship, encounter, conversation, and conflict? What sense of burden or obligation would we feel in our homes, our marriages, our workplaces, and our extended families? Would we tread more lightly on the earth? Speak less and listen more? Reconsider our grudges and grievances? Choose our words with greater care? Examine our motivations more closely?”

I’d like to think we would – I’d like to think that I would live with the generosity and kindness of the angels I’ve mentioned this morning

There were more angels we encountered along our way on that trip, but perhaps I’ll save some of their stories for another day

But I saw the face of God in our cab driver, in the priest, and in the Somali woman

And, I'd like to think that when the time comes for me to express welcome and hospitality that I will not hesitate to offer, at the very least, a cool drink of water for those who are so, so thirsty

I pray that my stories this morning have weaved together with some of the stories of angels in your own lives

And may so many who welcome you, encounter the love, grace, and mercy of the one who first welcomed you.

To God be the glory! Amen.