

From the Clergy Assistant

The following column appeared in the November 2010 edition of The Tower.

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Hebrews 13:2

Growing up in a large family with a grandfather, great-aunts, great-uncles, “regular” aunts and uncles, and cousins nearby, we always had lots of people around the table for the holidays. We even had to set a “children’s table” in the kitchen. And now our current four generations sometimes require us to eat in shifts... And for some reason, it seems that the more family members we have for a dinner, the easier it is to squeeze more chairs around the tables for other guests to join us and share in the abundance of food and fellowship with which we have been blessed. As long as those guests can stand the confusion of it all.

As I joined a few of the other members of the Ridgewood Interfaith Religious Leaders in planning the Community Thanksgiving Service for this year (which will be held on Sunday, November 21, at 7:30 pm at Emmanuel Baptist Church), we decided on a theme that is common to all of our faith groups, whether Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Christian: the importance of hospitality and the welcoming of the stranger.

The idea of “entertaining strangers” or “angels unawares” first appears in the Bible with Abraham as the first person shown opening the door of his home, albeit a tent, in hospitality to the three who appear “in human form” unexpectedly; the three turn out to be the Lord Himself and two angels (Genesis 18:1-8).

To express this theme of table fellowship as a way of creating community, for this Community Thanksgiving Service we will literally be setting a large table at the front of the Emmanuel Baptist Church sanctuary. In our setting of this table, members from each of our faith groups will bring forward an item which is an important symbol of each particular faith and explain the significance of that symbol for them. Many of our traditions share common symbols such as light, water, and bread, with variations in the symbols’ meaning for each. John and I will be bringing Light and setting candlesticks upon the table.

In this setting of the table with the various symbols of our faiths, we hope to create the image of table fellowship as a way of creating a larger community beyond our individual faith groups and welcoming *all*—perhaps “entertaining angels unawares.” Community is a lifeline. To be able to be a member of a community, to help in nurturing a community, to open a community to a “stranger”—to one *with-out* a community—is a blessing and a gift. Please join us as we celebrate and give thanks for this gift and for the many gifts with which God has blessed us.

Sunday, November 21, 7:30pm
Emmanuel Baptist Church
14 Hope Street, Ridgewood

The Rev. Joan F. Conley