

I don't know how it is at other colleges these days but let me tell you about my first day at college and compare it to our experience at Wofford College on Wednesday. As many of you know, my wife Kathryn and I took our oldest daughter, Rebecca, to Wofford on Wednesday to begin her first year of college. Before I tell you about that day, let me contrast our experience with Rebecca and Wofford with my experience with Clemson and my parents.

I went to visit my parents the other day in Columbia. We started to talk about Rebecca going off to college and my Mom shared about how emotional it was for her when she dropped my sister, Lib, off at Agnes Scott College. She reflected a little bit about what that was like. The tears, the fears of if she would be OK. The anguish of no longer having Lib around the house.

Lib is, of course, the oldest child in my family. I am the 5th child. And you know by the 5th child parenting takes on a different focus. When it was time for me to go off to college, I don't even remember where Mom was that day. My Dad took me all by himself. Life of the 5th child.

Anyway, I remember Dad driving me up to Clemson with my stuff in the back of his red, Ford pickup truck. We arrived on campus and there was no one there to greet us. We checked in and I got my room key for D-8 on Johnstone Hall. We made a few trips up the stairs and I dropped my few belongings into my room. Much fewer belongings than the U-Hauls I saw at Wofford on Wednesday.

And then Dad told me I would be alright and he drove away. I remember sitting in that dorm room all by myself and wondering what I was supposed to do next. I sat in that room very scared and feeling very much alone. I was very alone and had nowhere to go and nothing to do.

I want to contrast my experience with our experience with Rebecca on Wednesday at Wofford. We were told before we arrived to mark all of her stuff with her room number. We did that. Rebecca McGregor, room 202, Green.

So we drove up to campus and arrived at about 8:30 in the morning. We then got in the line with all of the other cars that had already arrived that day and whose kids were going to be staying in Green. The line of cars slowly snaked around the parking lot. As we waited in line, we were greeted by a young male and a young female representing a local restaurant who provided us some sweet tea for no charge.

Our car finally made its way toward the front of the line where we became the second car from the front. We couldn't see what was happening in front of the car in front of us. But then we received instructions by an older man that we were to drive our car forward.

What we pulled forward to was a college party. It was a college party with loud music and lots of young college students hopping around and having a blast. But this group of students were not hopping around because they were dancing to the music with one another. Actually they did do a little of that. The reason they were hopping around was because this group of students were there to unload the stuff from every car that came through the line that day.

The women's soccer team, the men's soccer team, other students were there to unload the stuff from the 440 freshmen who were arriving on campus. What happened next was amazing. As soon as we popped open the back of the van, several students were invading our car and picking it clean. It took no more than a minute. We had to hold on to whatever we did not want them to take away.

All of these students were having a party, yes. But they were having a party to volunteer their services to move new students into their dorm. When we arrived in Rebecca's dorm room, all of her stuff had been placed in her room by these students so that she could then begin to unpack and set up the next chapter in her life.

I share our experience not to lift up Wofford College. I was talking to a parent this week who said her son had a similar experience at Presbyterian College and another who had a similar experience at Georgia Tech. I haven't been on Clemson's campus on moving day since my experience 30 years ago so I don't know what happens there now.

But I do know this. I was touched by the hospitality I received that day from people that I had never met. I was touched by the hospitality of these college students. Their hospitality set a tone that day that carried over to everything that we experienced on Wednesday.

The writer of Hebrews says something about hospitality in what we read. Hebrews is really a sermon written to a group of Christians to encourage them to maintain hope in the midst of hardship. Some of these Christians were wondering if they should continue to follow the teachings of Jesus because of the difficulty that they were encountering.

We don't know who the author of this sermon is but we do know that this author sought to offer words of guidance to this community of both Jewish and non-Jewish people.

The writer's words to the community are also words which speak to us today in our culture. And I will share with you that because of this chapter I am going to attempt to reach out to someone that I do not want to reach out to.

Because of these words of Scripture which we have just read, I am going to attempt to get to know someone that I have no desire to reach out to. The only reason I am going to reach out and try to get to know this person is because of reading this Scripture from the Bible.

In the words we just read, the writer encourages the reader to remember to do several things. One of the actions which the writer says we are to do is to show hospitality to strangers. By showing hospitality to strangers we may entertain angels without even knowing it.

That reference to entertaining angels is a reference to our first reading from Genesis today. Three strangers appear at the entrance to the tent of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah welcome the strangers into their home not knowing who they are. They provide the best food for these strangers and treat them with great hospitality.

But these three strangers then become messengers of God's word for Abraham and Sarah. These three strangers inform Abraham and Sarah that Sarah will become pregnant in her old age and a great nation will come from them. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, Abraham and Sarah entertain angels without knowing it.

Entertaining angels without knowing it is what showing real hospitality to the stranger is all about. We experienced that at Wofford on Wednesday. The hospitality by these strangers impacted our mood and experience of a difficult day. Their hospitality to strangers made me want to trust them to care for my oldest daughter as she began her new life as a college student. I began to trust them because of their hospitality.

I shared that this Scripture is going to cause me to do something that I do not want to do. That is because this passage also says that hospitality means to remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them.

A few weeks ago a purse was stolen and included in the purse was an Allison Creek Church credit card. The person who stole the purse then quickly went to Wal-Mart and Lowes and went on a spending spree of several hundred dollars.

This person has a criminal history and is now in the Mecklenburg jail before she will be transferred to the York Co. jail. I am going to visit this person in the next couple of weeks. She may reject my visit. I don't know. I have no desire to see her. But the letter to the Hebrews does not ask us if we want to show hospitality to strangers or to remember those who are in prison.

The writer does not ask for feedback. The writer does not ask whether or not people deserve hospitality to be shown to them or if the person is in prison for just reasons. The writer says to show hospitality to the stranger and to remember those who are in prison. The writer also says to be mutual in love, to be faithful in marriage, and to keep your life free from the love of money.

I don't know what will happen when I make my visit. She has the right to refuse my visit. But that is how this text is going to impact my actions.

As I was writing this sermon, I was also reading about city leaders in our capital city of Columbia and about a plan they are initiating to move homeless people out of downtown to a designated place outside the downtown shopping area. They are planning this action to address the needs of the business community to create a more vital and safe downtown.

I get that. No one likes to shop and eat in restaurants when there are people nearby that live on the streets. I am as guilty as anyone of wanting to enjoy myself without being reminded that there are people that are without.

But I wonder what this passage of Scripture says to our leaders in Columbia and to all of us. Words about letting love be mutual, showing hospitality to strangers, remembering those in prison, being faithful in marriage, keeping our lives free from the love of money.

I am going to be doing something over the next couple of weeks that I would not normally do because of these words from the writer of Hebrews.

I wonder what these words might be challenging you to do? What stranger are you to reach out to and show hospitality? AMEN.

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-Text: Hebrews 13: 1-17

-Given: September 1, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Unison Prayer of Confession

We are always uncomfortable, God who watches over us, when you notice how we want to sit in the seats of honor. We can be so proper, so good, so well-off, that it is easy to imagine we are superior to the poor and marginal. We eat out and become uncomfortable when we see others who cannot afford the meal we are eating. We are so busy completing our 'To Do' list each day, that we forget to do good when we have the chance.

Forgive us, Welcoming God. Fill our emptiness with your grace and humility that we would spend our lives alongside Jesus, our Lord and Savior, throwing a party for the poor, the damaged, the prisoner, the lost, the oppressed. Hear these and all our prayers this day.

Prayers of the People

Holy are you, Nurturing God, and blessed is Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Life.

Glorified as your True Child, he came to show hospitality to all the strangers of the world.

Deserving of the seat of honor, he humbled himself to serve the guests including the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the stranger, and the alien.

Refusing to let us be left in the hands of sin and death he calls us to live free to his grace and love and acceptance. As we remember his life and death, we remember the life that he calls us to live through his resurrection.