

September 8, 2019  
Romans 12:1-13  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Come From Away***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

This fall we are focusing on the three themes from our recent strategic planning process:

Welcoming, Witnessing, Worshipping.  
Today's scripture touches on all those themes in its wisdom for Christian Living.

### SERMON

*Extending hospitality to strangers.*  
(Rms 12:13)

When Ron and I were in New York City in May we went to the musical *Come from Away*. It is the story of the extravagant hospitality given to strangers on 9/11 by the people of Gander, Newfoundland. When the skies were closed to air traffic on that fateful September day, the people of Gander opened their homes and lives to the airplane refugees. Thirty-eight transatlantic flights, with about 7,000 passengers, which were headed to the east coast of the U.S., were grounded in Gander, which has a population of about 10,000. In what they called Operation Yellow Ribbon, the people of Gander and the surrounding communities volunteered to house, feed, and entertain those who were stranded.

Knowing we were going to Newfoundland in July, we felt it would be a good introduction to the people of that island. And it was. (The Broadway Tour is coming to Boston in early November if you'd like to see it.) I liked the musical because it was about real people. There were no

Broadway stars playing roles and no elaborate costumes. The star of the show was kindness, expressed in a multitude of ways by a wide variety of people, even the gruff ones.

For six days, as North America stood still, the people of Gander were busy welcoming the world to their doorstep. They treated those from away like family. Even the city bus drivers who were on strike postponed the strike to help the plane people. What happened changed all their lives.

When you welcome strangers, sometimes you are entertaining angels unaware. When the locals wouldn't accept any money, the visitors went on to set up a scholarship fund for the young people of Gander, which has helped over 200 young people over the years.

As Mr. Rogers reminds us - In the midst of troubling times, it's important to pay attention to the helpers. The people of Gander provide a meaningful counter-image to the falling towers of 9/11.

Newfoundland – yes; they say, land. A mnemonic way to remember is understand Newfoundland. Our trip to Newfoundland was with a group from the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation for a contemplative retreat. While our time in Newfoundland this summer was planned, we, too, found the people to be welcoming and gracious.

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On the front page of today's Maine Sunday Telegram there is an article titled, *When Asylum seekers knocked, Brunswick opened its doors.*

It goes on to say, *With ample housing resources and an army of volunteers, this suburban town emerges as a key secondary destination for the recent wave of migrants.*

They estimate that around 100 people could be settling in Brunswick. Thankfully, the town has hired Nsiona Nguizani, the President of the Angolan Association in Maine, to be the Cultural Broker to facilitate communications and connections. I'm not sure how to pronounce his name correctly, but I'm hoping I will learn soon. He will be the guest at this month's Brunswick Area Interfaith Council meeting.

Thank you for already being part of the army of volunteers. Thanks to those of you who washed and sorted clothes this last week. Thank you for past contributions to the benevolence work of the church that meant we had reserve funds available so we could donate 3 new washer/dryer sets to families. We will continue to keep you posted on ways you can assist. All of us can welcome our newcomers with a smile and a hello when we meet them in the community.

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There are only a handful of people in this congregation who have been here all their lives. Most of us have journeyed here from other places and congregations. We are grateful for the ways we have been welcomed into this congregation over the years.

If you are new to our community, know that you are welcome. We are glad you are here. However, we don't know you well enough yet to know what will truly help you to feel welcome. Sometimes we're on target and others not so much.

We all want to feel welcome. It's just that the same thing doesn't work for everyone. Some people like lots of verbal interaction. That helps them to feel included. Others prefer to be given some space as they enter a new community.

Some people tell me they came to First Parish because it's big enough that they can check us out before making a commitment. Sometimes they've gone to another church where everyone was all over them like bees on honey, wanting to be welcoming. But it was too much.

On the other hand, other people have told me they didn't come back to First Parish because no one here spoke to them. It seemed like the regulars just talked to each other. As I explore their experience with them, it turns out that they were indeed welcomed by the official greeters and ushers, but no one else spoke to them. And I've been told that I don't count because I'm the pastor. They expect me to greet them.

Welcoming is a spiritual practice with lots of nuances because we are all different and all in different circumstances. On any particular Sunday a newcomer may be coming in joy, or curiosity or in grief.

We are glad you are here and look forward to getting to know you better. Even if you've been here for years, but have been keeping to the shadows, know you are welcome.

But it seems there are some basics we could keep in mind.

1. A warm greeting, initiated either by long time participants or newcomers, is always appropriate.

I can't remember everyone's names or even everyone's faces, sometimes, so you may have heard me ask you...

*Have we met before?*

That way you can inform me. Keep telling me your name until I get it.

One the other hand, if you are new and would like to meet more people feel free to say to someone,

*I don't think we've met before. I'm .....*

We are happy to have you start the conversation.

2. We don't have reserved seats, except in the choir loft, so sit where you wish. And feel free to join the choir.

The odd thing for me in saying this is that I sit in the same seat each week, but if you really wish to sit here, I'll move over.

3. If there is a ministry you wish we had, why not consider starting it.

We seek to be permission giving. Many of our present groups and ministries were started by someone who said, I wish...