

Before I read this morning's text, I want to share a story which is told by author Michael Lindvall. Michael Lindvall tells about the time a pastor walked down the street past Alvina Johnson's house one fall evening. Alvina's house has always been immaculately kept, both inside and out. Her small lawn is weed free. She somehow makes each blade of grass stand up straight. On each side of the front steps, standing at attention in front of the foundation, Alvina plants a row of marigolds, fourteen on each side.

A sidewalk leads directly to the concrete steps and divides the front yard in half. Squarely in the middle of each side is an old tire painted white and made into a planter. In each she plants seven more marigolds, six in a circle and one in the center. It's always been this way as long as anybody can remember. The entire yard is surrounded by a picket fence about three feet high.

As the pastor approached her house that night, he noticed a figure moving about the yard in the shadows cast by the autumn moon. The silhouette was bending over, as if looking for something on the ground. Then it stood up, lifted a half bushel basket, and walked toward the fence separating Alvina's yard from the Lundin's next door. The figure then dumped the contents of the basket over the fence into the Lundin's yard.

The pastor recognized Alvina as she shook the last of the leaves out of the basket. He cleared his throat and walked as noisily as he could to warn Alvina of his approach. She looked up, recognized him, quickly set the basket down, and began to remove the canvas gardening gloves.

"Alvina," he said, "you're working late." It was, after all, a quarter past eleven. The pastor looked pointedly at the pile of leaves she had just added to on the Lundin's side of the fence. It was so obviously odd for Alvina to be raking leaves in the dark and dumping them into the neighbor's yard. "They're the Lundin's leaves," she said. "They're off their big oak tree over there." She pointed an accusatory finger at the red oak behind him in the Lundin's front yard. "The slightest breeze from the west and half of them blow into my property.

I know they belong to them because I only have the one maple in the back. I sort them out, of course' I mean, I keep all the maple leaves. I figure they're mostly mine. But the oak leaves are theirs. It's only fair."

I was reminded of this story because it is a typical kind of model of the way we treat one another in our society. What's mine is mine and what is yours is yours. You keep your stuff to yourself and I will keep my stuff to myself. You stay on your side of the fence and I will stay on my side of the fence. We keep to ourselves because when we keep to ourself then we feel safe.

But then there are those moments of God's grace, I think. When strangers come in contact with one another and holy moments occur. Holy moments when people don't worry about protecting themselves but instead go out of their way to help someone in need. Such is what happens in the text we are about to read.

In the Scripture we are about to read, the Christian missionary Paul is traveling to Rome as a prisoner. Paul had gone on several missionary voyages around the Mediterranean Sea but this time he is on the water under the supervision of a Roman guard who is taking him to Rome to stand trial.

The ship they are on has rammed into rocks, capsized, and all 267 passengers have struggled to get themselves to dry land and to safety. The Roman guards want to kill the prisoners but they decide to let them try to reach land and survival. All 267 make it safely onto dry land. This is where we pick up the story.

I am going to be reading this morning from the translation called the Message. The Message reads more like a story which is appropriate for this morning's reading. Let us listen to Acts 28: 1-16. As we listen to this story, pay attention to how many acts of hospitality are shown to Paul and his fellow travelers.

As you prepare for Thanksgiving this year, I invite you to be thinking about all of the ways that people have shown hospitality to you. Maybe it was the person who stopped on the side of the road and picked you up and carried you to the nearest gas station. Maybe it was the person who offered a shoulder for you to cry on when you were sad or scream at when you were angry.

Maybe it was the person who gave you sound advice when you were searching for answers or the person who was stern to you when you needed someone to be stern to you. Maybe it was the person who welcomed you into their home or their life when you felt all alone. When we get to the prayers of the people this morning, I am going to ask if anyone has any stories you wish to share of a way someone provided hospitality to you when you really needed hospitality shown to you.

But I hope we don't just stop with recalling how others have been hospitable to us. I hope we are inspired by their hospitality to reach out and provide hospitality to others. May this thanksgiving and Advent and Christmas not be about taking care of ourselves but instead may it be a time for us all to make a commitment to show hospitality to others.

In the story from Paul's life that we read, hospitality is shown to strangers who have washed up on their shores, on their land, into their yards. What stranger has washed up into your life? Is it a family member who has made poor decisions? Is it a stranger whose life has crossed your life in some strange and unexpected way? Is it a friend whose situation has come close to you? Is it someone who is very different than you in a very real way but you have heard this story from Acts and you are now wondering to yourself, is this the person who has washed up into my life and I am to show hospitality towards?

Or are you the one who has gone through a shipwreck and you are looking for folks to show hospitality to you? Have you felt washed up and feel whipped out?

Sometimes shipwrecks happen. And sometimes survivors of shipwrecks come washing up on our shores. And sometimes we are in the shipwreck and come crashing onto the shores of others.

When survivors from shipwrecks come washing up on our shores, how are we going to react? Are we going to be Alvina who spends her time keeping her neighbors trash in their own yards? Or are we going to be like all of the folks in the story from Acts who took care of the shipwreck survivors? AMEN.

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-Lindvall, Michael, *The Good News from North Haven*, Pocket Books, 1991, p. 141

-Text: Acts 28:1-16

-Given: November 22, 2009 in Allison Creek Pres (York, SC)