Good morning. I'm going to take you back 25 years ago to the morning of September 11. I think most of us can remember where we were that morning. I remember that it was a beautiful clear day here in Toronto. I was busy caring for my children at home, expecting, like the rest of us, that this would be a normal day. Within hours, everything changed. With the hijacking of 4 planes, the US airspace was closed. Now on the northeast tip of North America on an island called Newfoundland, there is an airport. And next to it is a small town called Gander. On September 11, 38 planes were diverted to land at that airport, bringing 6000 passengers, and nearly doubling Gander's population.

Those living in Gander and the nearby towns sprang into action to welcome and care for the frightened passengers. Townspeople converted public buildings, schools, and churches into shelters. They opened their homes to passengers, providing beds, meals, warm showers, a cup of tea. They donated their own bedding, clothing, and mountains of food (they even re-purposed their town hockey rink into a giant refrigerator). Pharmacists filled prescriptions for free, school bus operators suspended their strike action to provide transportation for the "plane people," and passengers' pets were cared for. Jews who required kosher meals, Muslims who needed Halal, and others who required vegetarian meals were accommodated.

Most importantly, the townspeople provided a safe space for passengers to process the horrific events of 9/11. They set up televisions for their guests to keep up with the news, they installed banks of telephones to call loved ones; they provided a listening ear, a kind word, a hug.

This story of Gander is an example of hospitality at its finest. In this heartwarming story, we find three important elements of hospitality. First we see townspeople *welcoming the stranger*. People from different countries, nationalities, languages, and religions, and varied social status (from refugees to CEOs) filed off the planes and into the welcoming spaces made available by those in the town. Second, townspeople *provided for the physical*, *emotional*, *and spiritual needs* of their guests. Even pastoral care was offered by Salvation Army clergy.[1] Third,

[1] Memories of 9/11 - Salvation Army Canada (salvationist.ca)

the hospitality of those in Gander *contributed to flourishing*—both for the "plane people" as guests and for the townspeople as hosts. On the dark days immediately following 9/11, the world shone a little brighter on "the rock" that is the Island of Newfoundland because of the hospitality of those in Gander.

The story of Gander welcoming the plane people is hospitality on a large scale. But it is really made up of many small acts of hospitality, offered by hundreds of regular, every-day individuals who leaned in to welcome and care for the strangers that literally landed among them.

Last week Steve began our new series about hospitality. He reminded us that ***Biblical hospitality is the attitude and practice of welcoming strangers by providing an environment in which they are free to become accepted, included, and loved.*** He went on to remind us that hospitality originates with God, who has first welcomed us, and has made space for us within his family. And because we have experienced God's generous welcome, we then extend the welcome to others.

Today, we continue the series as we explore the theme of welcoming Jesus, who is the stranger in disguise. Many times, when I have talked with people of faith about the reason they practice hospitality, they tell me that they want to be the hands and feet of Jesus. They want to model and embody Jesus to the other person. And this is good, and right, and valuable. This is biblical, as we are told that our attitudes and actions should reflect those of Jesus. But something is missing in this understanding. Yes, we model Jesus when we extend hospitality, but we also encounter Jesus in the other person. So today, we are going explore what it means to welcome Jesus in disguise.

Now, in ancient times, this wasn't a new idea. Ancient Greeks believed that the gods would sometimes come to earth in disguise, masquerading as humans in order to test humanity to see how moral they were. Because hospitality was a virtue, the gods were especially interested in how they would be welcomed. When a god came to earth disguised as a stranger, and the god was welcomed and cared for, divine blessings were poured out on the human host who offered hospitality.

So this idea of God coming to earth disguised as a stranger was not unusual for those who followed Jesus in his day. Jews had their own story of their God coming to Abraham's tent disguised as a traveller and being welcomed.[2] And in that hospitality encounter, Abraham and Sarah receive divine blessing in the promise of a son in their old age.

We see the same idea in the story of Jesus, don't we? Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus coming to earth as a stranger. The author of John[3] says that when Jesus came people did not recognize him: they did not see him for who he was even though he lived among them. Jesus came into places that no one ever expected. He was a baby asleep in a manger, a refugee in Egypt, the homeless rabbi who walked the dusty paths of Palestine, a hungry man who relied on the provision of others in order to survive.

Here is our main point for today: **Jesus comes to us in disguise**. Every stranger we meet is an opportunity to meet Jesus. If you want to meet Jesus, say the gospel writers, you must welcome strangers.

This morning we will explore two stories from the Gospels that point to the holy space that opens when we welcome Jesus in disguise. I want this to be extremely practical, so before we move on, I'd like you to take out the index card that was on your chair when you arrived this morning. You are also going to need a pen for this exercise. There are pens in the seat pouches in front of you, and there is a basket of extra pens under the first chair in each row. Feel free to pass these along to those who need one.

On one side of the card, please make a list of 3-5 people who are strangers to you. You may know them by name, you may rub shoulders with them here at Cornerstone, or meet them on a walk in your neighbourhood, or see them at school or work. But you do not know them, or have any real relationship with them. Jot those names down now. Hold onto that index card as we will return to it later.

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[2] Genesis 18: 1-15
[3] John 1:10-11

Our first Gospel story is found in Luke 24. This is a hospitality story that takes place on Resurrection Day. Two broken-hearted and confused followers of Jesus have left Jerusalem. It's been a horrific few days as Jesus has been arrested, crucified, buried, but now there are whispers of a resurrection.

Starting in verse 13 we read: "Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, **14** and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. **15** While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, **16** but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. **17** And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. **18** Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' [4]

Let's pause here for a minute as there are a couple of things to notice. First, **the disciples on the road do not recognize the identity of the stranger who has joined them**. While the reader is told that the stranger is Jesus, the disciples do not recognize him because *"their eyes were kept from recognizing him."* Why is that, I wonder? As disciples of Jesus, surely they would know the face, the voice, the mannerisms of their beloved leader! But they don't. Why don't they recognize him? Is it because he is in a place he is not supposed to be? Is it because their expectations or their assumptions make them blind to the possibility that the stranger could be any other than a stranger. This brings us to the second thing to notice: **The disciples use the term 'stranger' when speaking of Jesus**. In the original language, this word means 'foreigner.' It carries the idea of someone who is 'outside the house.' The disciples view their fellow traveller solely as an outsider, one who is different from them. Perhaps this gives us a clue as to why they do not recognize that Jesus himself is walking beside them. The storyteller has it right – their eyes were kept from recognizing the stranger because they looked and saw only who they expected to see – a foreigner walking a dusty road. They missed the identity of the stranger because they weren't looking for Jesus. Right in the place they least expected is where Jesus positioned himself.

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[4] Luke 24: 13-18 (NRSV)

We pick up the story in v 28: "**28** As they came near the village to which they were going, he [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. **29** But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. **30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." [5]

As good Jews, the disciples place a high value on hospitality, so they welcome this foreigner to stay with them. At the evening meal something unusual happens. Roles are reversed and the stranger becomes the host. The stranger picks up the bread, blesses it, breaks it apart, and gives it to the disciples. In these moments, their eyes are opened and they see the true identity of Jesus.

Why do they notice his identity now, and not earlier? I suspect it was the actions of Jesus that revealed his identity. Notice that it wasn't his teaching that revealed his identity – it was the way he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and shared it. Jesus did one of the most Jesus-y things possible: he became the host as he had been so many times before. As Jesus feeds them, they recognize him. The Divine is hidden in the guise of the stranger until his behaviour reveals who he is.

Our second story is the passage that was read for our Scripture reading this morning. Before diving into the words of Jesus I want to take a few moments to set the context for the passage. This story is the fourth in a series of stories Jesus told in response to his disciples' question in Matthew 24:3 "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" He then tells stories about masters who leave servants to manage estates, and bridesmaids who are prepared (or not). All these stories share the theme that we do not know when Jesus will return, but we must be ready at all times, and this readiness is demonstrated by the way in which we act while he is away.

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[5] Luke 24: 28-31 (NRSV)

Jesus then wraps up his teaching with this story about his return. The picture Jesus paints is of the King coming in glory with the angels to judge the citizens of the world. The King separates the people who are identified as "Sheep" (those who get it right) and "Goats" (those who get it wrong). We would expect Jesus to judge – separate the people - based on criteria that we often use today to judge the faith of another person. We expect Jesus to assess a person's beliefs, understanding of doctrine, ability to provide a statement of faith. But instead, Jesus used a completely different set of standards to judge. To the sheep he says:

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. **35** For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. **36** I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

37 "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? **38** Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? **39** When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

40 "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'[6]

Let's stop here for a moment. This story has several surprising twists. We find two of them here:

First: Jesus hasn't been absent and suddenly returns in glory. Instead, **Jesus has been present all along, disguised in the form of the most vulnerable**: the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger….

Second: **The sheep do not recognize Jesus**. They did not see through his disguise. The sheep thought that they were caring for the sick, hungry, lonely strangers who were in front of them.

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[6] Matthew 25: 34-40 (NLT)

They did not believe that they were caring for Jesus. Instead, their acts of mercy to those vulnerable strangers among them bubbled up from their love of God and love of neighbour. Here we see how **hospitality brings together the two great commandments to love God and love our neighbour.** We express our love for God as we love our neighbours. The fruit of their discipleship is evident in how they cared for the strangers among them.

So what about the goats? Jesus uses the same standards to judge them. **42** For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. **43** I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

44 "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?'

45 "And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'[7]

Here's another surprise: **the goats also did not recognize Jesus in the stranger**. But the difference is this. **When the sheep saw persons in need of hospitality, they leaned in. When the goats saw the same people, they leaned away.** They did not extend welcome or care to the least of these. They ignored their suffering fellow humans. They failed to love God by failing to love their neighbour.

If you are like me, you might be wondering, "Am I a sheep, or am I a goat?" Well, I think we can easily be both. Some days, when I am at my best, I am a sheep. I take notice, I lean in, I welcome, I extend love to those who come across my path. But at other times, I am a goat when I fail to do so. When I am too preoccupied to see the stranger in front of me. When I am too hurried to stop and attend to my neighbour. When I allow my biases and prejudices to cloud my perception of others. Jesus' story is a cautionary tale, as one writer put it. It reminds

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[7] Matthew 25: 42-45

us that in this in-between time, when we await his return, we ready ourselves for his return by welcoming and caring for the strangers among us.

From these stories, we see that **Jesus comes to us in disguise**. Jesus was the traveller on the road to Emmaus. Jesus was the poor, lonely, hungry, naked, imprisoned, sick and the like.

As we wrap up, let's pull this together with three summary points.

First: If we aren't looking for Jesus, we won't see him. But the wonderful thing is that Jesus tells us where to look, and where to find him. He is found in the food pantry pick up line on Saturday mornings, or in the woman who has left an abusive relationship with just the clothes on her back. Jesus is found in your immigrant neighbour who lives across the street from you. He is found in the student who sits by herself at lunch. Jesus is found playing alone on the playground, and in the child who always gets picked last for a game. Jesus is found in hospital rooms, in nursing homes, in safe injection sites, and huddled in a street corner, warming himself over a subway grate.

Second: A divine encounter occurs every time we welcome the stranger. In welcoming the stranger, we welcome Jesus himself. How does this work? How does a person actually see Jesus in the stranger that they welcome? Does this mean we 'imagine' that the stranger is Jesus? That certainly can help provide motivation for welcome, but I think it goes deeper, and when we do, we enter into mystery. I'm reminded of Paul's preaching in Acts 17[8] where he says that we are all connected because God pervades every area of the cosmos. In God, Paul says, we live and move and have our being. Not only is every human made in the image of God, we are all children of the God who created us and breathes life into us. Somehow, any time we encounter a stranger we encounter Jesus. And in those encounters, we are given glimpses of the Divine.

While a divine encounter happens every time we welcome a stranger, there will be many times you are not aware of it. After all, those in Matthew 25 who cared for the most vulnerable were surprised to find they had cared for Jesus. It's not that every interaction with a stranger

[8] Acts 17:28

should be extraordinary; it's about attuning our hearts toward the stranger, the vulnerable, or those outside our circle. It's about developing a rhythm of hospitality that makes space for the stranger – and for Jesus to show up. And occasionally, you will find yourself meeting Jesus as you welcome a stranger. In those holy moments we meet Jesus through the kindness, gentleness, or compassion of the stranger. For example, those of us who visit our unhoused friends in downtown Toronto have found Jesus in the care our street friends provide for each other, in the way they share their belongings freely, in some of the profound insights they have.

Third: In a hospitable interaction there is mutuality. I am a stranger to the stranger I welcome. The stranger I welcome has the opportunity to see Jesus reflected in me and I see Jesus in them. What a holy space this becomes! In this holy space God is revealed to both parties – and this results in mutual transformation and blessing. I'm guessing that you might recall a time when you extended Jesus' loving welcome to another person and came away feeling surprised at how much that interaction impacted and changed you.

I think this is why the story of the hospitality of Gander draws us in and is so inspiring. On one of the darkest days of history, when hate and violence reigned, we are shown another way – God's way. We see glimpses of God in the selflessness and generosity of the townspeople. We see beauty, hope, and flourishing. We see how humanity can welcome each other and how Jesus shows up in the midst of it all.

In conclusion: Bring out that index card and look at the names you listed there. Have you leaned in, or leaned away to those strangers? What assumptions, biases, and expectations have you had about them? Have your expectations caused you to miss the Divine in them? What changes in you if you look at those people as ones where you might just meet Jesus in disguise?

Now turn the card over. Take a moment to reflect on what the Spirit might be whispering to you. On this empty side, jot down a few thoughts there. You might want to create a brief prayer that gives voice to your heart. This is the prayer I created on my card – you are welcome to use it, or create your own.

Jesus, stranger God. I want to welcome you, and meet you, in the stranger.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus, You taught us that whenever we welcome a stranger, we welcome you. Open our eyes today to see past the disguises you wear. When you come to us as a person looking for help, give us hearts that are quick to serve. When you appear in the face of someone who is lonely, forgotten, or hard to love, grant us the grace to offer warmth and kindness.

Forgive us for the times we have been too busy, too cautious, or too indifferent to notice you. Break down any walls of fear or judgment in our hearts. Let your love flow through us so that we never miss an opportunity to encounter you in the people we meet, and to host you as we welcome the stranger. Amen