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Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

The Craigslist Gospel

As you know, my time here at First Church is quickly approaching its end—next week, in fact, will be my final Sunday with you all. Since I will be starting as the Transitional Pastor of Waitsfield United Church of Christ on September 15th, there have been some tasks that I simply could not wait to finish. One of those was one cleaning out my condo on Farmington Avenue.

On August 9th, Elizabeth and I received and accepted an offer on our home. She happened be to down from Vermont that weekend so together we devised a plan. Since she had already found furniture for our new place, it would be my job to get rid of all of our old furniture here. Living room set, dining room set, bedframe, mattress, bookshelves, desk, and sideboard: it all had to go. That afternoon we posted the items for sale on Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace, two common internet platforms for regular people to buy and sell their treasures.

Within a few hours, the first messages started to trickle in. One of them was from Yurii, who wanted to see our bedframe. The next day, he arrived with his younger brother. Both were blond-haired, tall, skinny, and wearing patterned short-sleeve button-ups over khaki shorts. As we rode up the elevator, Yuri explained that he was setting up his first apartment in Manchester and continuing his education as an engineering student. After looking at the goods, he conversed with his brother in Ukrainian and decided he wanted not only the bedframe but also the living room set.

The brothers returned a few hours later with a moving truck and their father. He spoke broken English, and yet it was clear from his gaze that he was very proud of his sons. As Yurii struggled to dismantle the bedframe with our only Allen wrench, I joked, "You're really an engineer, huh?" This evoked a deep belly laugh from his father. As he and Yurii labored to twist and turn the furniture through the door, he would later look at me with a big grin and simply utter, "Engineer!"

When he saw a picture of me in in my hooded alb and stole, he asked if I were a priest. I explained that I was a protestant pastor at the church nearby. He then responded, "I've gone to an Orthodox Church my whole life, and I always wanted to study theology."

Little did he know that he was teaching me a theology lesson. Is there any greater love than helping carry your child's couch down the stairs from the fourth floor? I thought of Yurii's father as I pondered the text from Hebrews this week. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers," it reads, "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." It seems like there was an actual angel in my apartment that day.

That line is simply one of the many exhortations from today's text. Essentially, the author of Hebrews gives us a list here of dos and don'ts. The first summarizes the rest: "Let mutual love continue." Mutual love or brotherly love, *philadelphia* in Greek, is a way of embodying Jesus'

Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Although I first heard this from teachers encouraging me to be nice, the true call to mutual love is more demanding.

Hebrews makes the rigor of mutual love real in the context of imprisonment, torture, marriage, finance, and, yes, hospitality. It sets the bar high. We are not only to treat strangers as ourselves but as if they are as worthy of our loving care as angels themselves.

While I cannot claim to have been a perfect host conducting business with strangers through Craigslist, I did my best to offer a fair price, help folks move their items, and to treat them with kindness. Even after taking the necessary precaution of meeting in a public place or bringing along another person, the whole interaction is still fundamentally awkward in a way. On Craigslist, we often invite total strangers into our homes to buy our old stuff. Is it all really worth the risk?

Before I answer that question, let me tell you about a young woman I met named Krystal. We traded messages, and she asked me to wait a day for her to pick up the bookshelves I posted. I agreed mostly because I was getting sick of responding to other peoples' messages.

When I met her and her boyfriend outside of my building, she was giddy with excitement. Heading up the elevator, she told me that she worried through her entire shift that someone else would buy the bookshelves, and she arranged a ride from Springfield. "These are perfect for my apartment," she exclaimed when she first saw them. As her eyes glanced down at my books piled on the floor, she said, "Now I need to get me some books, too. I don't want my son to grown up in a home without books."

Repeatedly, the people who bought my old stuff were amazingly normal. They had hopes and dreams, and they were excited to find a good deal. It brought me back to the feeling I had when Elizabeth and I found the black sideboard on Craigslist three and a half years ago. It was the right piece to store my great-great grandmother Mabel's china and at a price we could afford. That sideboard helped shape our little condo into our home.

As the time in the old place quickly ended, I did not have much time to intentionally clear the remnants of our life together here in West Hartford. I loaded some of it, mostly books and wedding gifts, with Greg and Liz's help into a U-Haul that I drove to the new house; I gave some to friends and Goodwill; and I tossed the rest into a dumpster. Yes, some of it needed to go. There was no room in the car and no reasonable way to donate my quarter full bottles of hand soap and random cleaning supplies. It hurt more to toss the things that I did not sell or give away, such as an Ikea lamp and my Gramp's old George Forman Grill, because I failed to give myself enough time.

Believe it or not, Craigslisting our old stuff was one of the highlights of my move, and it was definitely worth it. Any extra cash I made or saved along the way was simply bonus. As a seller, I loved the feeling I got from meeting the person face-to-face who will find joy in my old

possessions. I found it such a blessing for the economy to serve as a forum for joy and brotherly love rather than a locus of exploitation and waste.

My story is one of finding joy through a special kind of hospitality from a position of privilege. The budding congregation of Hebrews, likely in either Rome or Jerusalem, was not so comfortable. They knew what it was like to withstand the worst of injustice. To some it might seem callous to order people with limited control over their circumstances to simply do better. It can feel fruitless to continue in mutual love when the recipient does not love you back.

The Good News of this text is that there has always been love within and around us to pass on. It reads, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." In short, the embodiment of God's love is always present. When we feel defeated and unable to love because of the horror of yet another mass shooting or the routine sins that pile up destroying lives and our earth, it is not all up to you to kick the economy of mutual love into gear. Jesus has already loved us from the beginning of time, loves us today, and will love us tomorrow. That love resides within each of us and to offer our neighbors love is to love Jesus. Such love is always mutual for us since Jesus loves us first.

If you don't believe me, maybe you will believe the words of a song so close to many of our hearts. Sing with me:

"Jesus loves me this I know

For the Bible tells me so

Little ones to him belong

They are weak but he is strong

Yes Jesus loves me

Yes Jesus loves me

Yes Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."

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