

June 14, 2020  
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Genesis 18:1-15          Creative Hospitality  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Genesis 18:1-15          New Revised Standard Version

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

God appears to Abraham. Abraham is resting in the heat of the day, looks up and sees three men at the entrance of his tent, and he springs into action. Abraham didn't know that these three visitors were from God. We only know that as a reader of the story. These travelers expected a response of welcome, and they were not disappointed.

Abraham offers them genuine welcome. He offers them water to wash their dusty feet, and in a huge understatement he offers to bring "a little bread." Abraham asks Sarah to make cakes and then tells her exactly how she should make them. He kills a calf and asks a servant to prepare it. He takes curds and milk to the strangers, along with this impromptu feast, and watches them eat.

It is over the top hospitality, but it reminds me of making pastoral house calls in rural Texas. I would arrive and an entire angel food cake would be waiting for me to eat. Or made from scratch biscuits would just be coming out of the oven. I was powerless to resist. I would show up at the door and a feast would await me. It was hospitality, it was welcome, it was how you treat family.

For some of us hospitality is a creative act. You may enjoy cooking for family and friends or decorating the house for a party. You may love flowers and creating the perfect center piece. Our creative efforts are designed for connection, to make others feel welcome and comfortable, to facilitate conversation and the building of relationships.

Abraham didn't know who these visitors were, but he and Sarah wanted to make sure they felt welcomed, that they felt like family. It is powerful how Abraham cares for the messengers, and in effect, how Abraham cares for God. The story tells us the three men are God. God in human form. Abraham doesn't know that it is God, so his hospitality is not to impress God. Abraham's hospitality is what you did at that time and in that culture. The visitors expected to be met with welcome and with generosity because that kind of welcome was typical in those days. People depended on the kindness of strangers to sustain them on their journeys. Biblical society valued openness and generosity to strangers and outsiders.

Did you hear about the man in Washington D.C. who opened his home to protestors last week? Protestors were marching away from the White House and wound up in a residential neighborhood where they were boxed in by police. Rahul Dubey was out on his front stoop and

had let some of the protestors charge their phones and use his bathroom. He said he heard a big bang and his eyes started to burn, and he said it looked like a human tsunami for about a quarter of a block coming down the street. He started to wave people into his home and housed 70 people overnight. Neighbors sent over food and other neighbors worked to get the protestors rides home in the morning. They had more volunteers than they needed. Rahul did whatever it took to provide welcome and guarantee the safety of people that he did not know.<sup>1</sup>

These days it is hard to imagine walking up to a stranger's home and expecting to be welcomed, fed, and treated with generosity and hospitality just because you passed by. Welcome doesn't come easily in our current culture. People have said that one of the benefits of this time of quarantine is that we have gotten to know our neighbors because people are home and outside. The coronavirus made us stop and slow down.

I am really struck by Abraham's words to the travelers. "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." His words are welcoming and uplifting. So often our words demean and belittle, but Abraham speaks words of encouragement and equality. How can we create hospitality with our words? Or with the way that we listen? It is so easy to use language of hate. We make some people into our enemy and it dominates what we hear and how we respond.

My mom told me a story about her friend Sandra. Sandra is black. When she travels Sandra always stays with friends because when she was growing up, she and her family were not allowed to stay in hotels. Hotels were only for white people. The hospitality of friends was required if a black family was to make any kind of journey. So now, as an adult, Sandra prefers staying with friends. It reminds her of her childhood and of the changes that have occurred.

Hospitality toward God is extended when we offer it to the men, women, and children in the midst of us. When we do it unto them, we do it unto God. Extending ourselves in hospitality to the stranger involves risk and vulnerability. It looks like conversations with people who are different than us. Conversations where we listen. Hospitality and welcome is hard. It takes work, and it is easy to grow weary. I think it begins with talking less and listening more. It is easy to fall back into the language of enemy and opponent.

How can we mirror Abraham and Sarah's kind and generous and unafraid welcome? When I do premarital counseling I lift up Philippians 4:8, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

We as a church are part of God's living body and it is our call to welcome people fully, as they are, not as we wish they would be. Welcome and thank you for joining me in welcoming others. Thanks be to God, Amen.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/02/us/dc-protesters-sheltered-trnd/index.html>