

Hospitality
Genesis 18:1-10
Sermon by Dan Schrock
November 15, 2015

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. ²He 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. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let 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.” ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then 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.

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰Then 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. (NRSV)

I

I am possibly the worst person in this congregation to do a sermon on hospitality. I am one of the most inhospitable persons I know of. As an introvert, I prefer talking one-on-one with people instead of meeting with larger groups. I like to cook, even to cook for larger groups, but I’m not enthusiastic about serving as the host for a group of people. I’m happy to go to someone else’s house for a meal, but to have people come to my house is a different story. Jenny is much better at hospitality than I. Simply put, I’m not a very good host. I pretty much stink at hospitality.

Many of you are really gifted at hospitality. I know it because I’ve been in many of your homes and watched how you function both there and here at church. You extend hospitality with ease and grace, with warmth and love. This church is what it is partly because of your gift of hospitality. One of you should really be doing this sermon, not I.

II

In the story we just read from Genesis, Abraham enthusiastically extends hospitality to three strangers. People in the ancient Near East highly valued hospitality. In those days there were no Marriotts or Holiday Inns, and not even a Mennonite Your Way

network. Because phones and computers had not yet been invented, people had no way of contacting each other in advance, to say “I’m coming for a visit next week so could I please have dinner with you and stay overnight at your tent?” You had no way of knowing that guests were coming until they strolled into your camp.

The wilderness where Abraham and Sarah sometimes lived could be a dangerous place. Sometimes there were bandits or tribal conflicts with fighting. For this reason, cultures of the ancient Near East had high standards for hospitality. As the host, you were expected not only to feed your guests, but also to shelter them at night and even to protect them from bandits and other shady characters. Moreover, you had to do this on the spur of the moment, without the benefit of planning in advance. Providing hospitality was considered a sacred obligation, so much so that refusing to provide it was thought to be a sin, or at least extremely bad manners. Therefore in a sense Abraham is only doing what his culture expected him to do: namely, when strangers show up unexpectedly at your tent, you feed them; and if necessary, you shelter them.

And yet Abraham carries out his hospitality with great gusto. Sitting outside his tent one hot noonday, he notices three strange men in his campground. Never saw them before in his life. He has no idea what their names are or what their business is. Nevertheless, as soon as he spots them he jumps to his feet, runs over to them, gets down on his knees, and bows to them with his forehead on the ground. How many of us treat our guests with that kind of alacrity, with that kind of enthusiasm? I certainly don’t. I’ve never kneeled and bowed before a guest. Have you?

Abraham next launches into gracious, deferential speech. Notice he addresses his guests by calling them “lord” (v. 3), thereby putting himself in the role of a servant, which in a sense is what a host is—a servant who looks after the well-being of the guests. Then Abraham lists what he can do to serve his guests. I can fetch a little water, he says, and wash the dust off your feet. I can bring you a little bread, if you like, so you can refresh yourselves. They agree to all of this.

But Abraham has actually understated what he intends to do. He has much more in mind than giving his guests a little bit of bread. He runs over to the tent and asks Sarah

to take their best flour, knead it to activate the gluten, and bake some cakes out of it. Probably what he means is to make a kind of flatbread. Next Abraham runs to his herd of animals, selects the best calf that will make the most tender meat, and gives it to a servant of his to butcher on the spot. Finally, Abraham rustles up some curds and fresh milk.

Folks, this is a regular feast! Even though Abraham is a nomad living on the edge of the wilderness, he gathers the best ingredients he has to offer. We might guess those ingredients were prepared carefully, artfully, perhaps even lovingly. The preparations would likely have taken at least an hour, perhaps longer. When the feast was finally ready, Abraham stood by to serve while his guests ate in the shade of the oak tree.

Once the feast is finished, the story takes a surprising turn. Normally you'd expect the guests to stand up, thank their host, and continue on their journey. But that's not what happens next. Instead the three strangers announce that Sarah and Abraham will get pregnant and give birth to a son. This announcement strikes Sarah as ridiculous because they're old enough to be grandparents or even great-grandparents. But as one of the strangers rhetorically asks, "Is anything too wonderful for God?" (v. 14).

Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality for the joy of it. They did not do it with the expectation of getting anything in return, much less a son. Yet in various biblical stories, guests sometimes turn around and surprise their hosts with a gift. It happens here in this story. It happens again in 1 Kings 17, when the widow of Zarephath graciously extends hospitality to the prophet Elijah and then in a surprising twist of events, ends up receiving not just one but two precious gifts from Elijah: the gift of endless flour and oil during a nasty famine, and the gift of Elijah bringing her son back to life. It also happened one night in a little town called Emmaus, when two people invited a stranger to eat dinner with them, only to have the stranger turn around and reveal himself to be none other than the resurrected Jesus (Lk. 24). In the Bible guests sometimes bring surprise gifts which they then shower onto their hosts.¹

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 51.

When has that kind of thing happened to you? Which of your guests surprised you with a gift you didn't expect? The gift could have been small or great, tangible or intangible. What was it?

III

Hospitality is not only about food. We do not have to be great cooks in order to be hospitable. Hospitality is a mindset, an attitude of the heart. Hospitality is mostly about creating a space where strangers can enter our lives and become friends rather than enemies.² In this way hospitality helps to make peace. Hospitality isn't about trying to change our guests, but about providing space for our guests where change can occur. Nor is hospitality a strategy for recruiting new people. Instead it's something we're called to do for the sake of Christ and in the name of Christ. One member of a Methodist church in Naples, Florida, described her congregation's ministry of radical hospitality this way: "We don't care who you are, where you came from, what color you are, what your background is, [or] with whom you share your life. You are here, now, at Cornerstone [Church] and you are a brother or sister in Christ."³

Hospitality does not need to be about meals. One form of hospitality many of us practice is raising children. For parents, children are guests whom we host in our homes for a period of time. Our children may leave at some point to make their own way in the world. In any case, the role of parental host does change over time: hosting a two-year-old is not like hosting a twelve-year-old and neither is like hosting a twenty-two-year-old. Even we who don't have children might still function as hosts through our work in local schools or our work in this congregation's nurseries, classrooms, and youth groups. We can also practice hospitality in hospitals where staff host patients, in schools where teachers host students, and in certain kind of businesses like restaurants and coffee shops where employees host customers. And we cannot forget Goshen's Interfaith Hospitality Network, where local churches like ours host people without homes.

² Nouwen, 51.

³ Quoted in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 82.

In the Christian tradition, hospitality is something we do without expecting anything in return. Hospitality is generosity incarnate. It's one way we can represent the presence of Christ in the world, who offered others the best he had—namely, himself.