

## The Language of Lent: Accommodation

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“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” -- Hebrews 13:2

Rarely is the connection between a passage from the old Testament and a passage from the New Testament as obvious as it is in this morning's readings from Genesis and Hebrews, but sometimes it's helpful to be straightforward. And that's what I want to be this morning – straightforward about the notion of Christian hospitality that I'm framing in the language of Lent. Hospitality is about accommodation – accommodating the unexpected, the unannounced, even the undesired – and that's where Christian hospitality and hospitality as we commonly think of that term diverge.

We're going to be taking up the topic of hospitality as a spiritual practice in our study group this Wednesday, and if any of you who have not been able to join our conversations so far would like to participate, you'd be welcome. If you want to join us for supper, email or phone me by Tuesday morning so we know how many to cook for, and then show up at 6 p.m. in the Social Hall. If you want to come just for the discussion, that should start around 7. I'd encourage you to buy a copy of Marjorie Thompson's book, *Soul Feast*, which we still have available in the church office, and read her chapter on hospitality prior to the discussion. And then make time to read the rest of the book, as well. I think you'll find much of benefit in her discussion of Christian spiritual practices.

To start our thinking about hospitality this morning, let's return to that famous story in Genesis 18 about Abraham and his three mysterious guests.

We usually read that story on the Second Sunday after Pentecost in Year A, which is when the Revised Common Lectionary assigns it, where it is paired with the passage in Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus sends out his twelve apostles, telling them to preach the good news in the towns and villages of Israel where they are welcomed hospitably. If they are not welcomed, they are to shake the dust of that house or town from their feet, move on, and leave to God the judgment against those unwelcoming people. For, Jesus says, “it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”

Pretty tough language for something we take as casually as hospitality, and that's the first thing we should note about hospitality this morning: the Bible takes hospitality much more seriously than we do. In scripture, people who do not extend hospitality to others fall under some of the most severe judgment the Bible envisions, and those who do provide that gift are seen as among the most righteous people in the Bible.

And that's why hospitality appears in the story of Abraham, whose story constitutes the the beginning of the story of the chosen people. To be chosen by God is to be called to live in the image and likeness of that God, whose chief characteristic is creator. And what is creation except the extension of hospitality to things that are not yet. Creation itself is the first and most important expression of hospitality – God's hospitality to us and to all other creatures – which is why I usually bid your prayers of thanksgiving for the beauty and bounty of the earth. It's not simply because creation's

nice; it's because creation is God's expression of hospitality to us, and the appropriate response to hospitality is always gratitude.

So hospitality, far from being an optional add-on to the business of being faithful people, is actually embedded in creation itself and in the story of our chosenness as the spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Our story, adapted from the Jewish people, is one of radical hospitality. And it begins in the beginning, in Genesis. Let's return to that story.

Abraham and Sarah have been called from their home in Ur, an ancient city in what is modern-day Iraq, and they've been called to head west, to the land of the Canaanites.

Abraham and Sarah are what anthropologists call semi-nomadic pastoralists, which means that they lead their herds of sheep and goats from fertile place to fertile place, settling down in tent encampments for weeks or months at a time, until the seasons and the depletion of vegetation force them to move on.

As our story today opens, Abraham and Sarah have settled at a place called Mamre, which was near modern-day Hebron in the Palestinian West Bank. Abraham is sitting in the shade of his tent during the heat of the day, when his quiet pastoral reverie is interrupted by God in the manifestation of three unannounced guests.

Or are they guests? Might they simply be strangers? Might they be visitors? Might they even be enemies?

We, the readers, know that it's the Lord appearing to Abraham, but Abraham does not, which is why the book of Hebrews exhorts Christians to show hospitality to strangers "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Abraham is about to serve lunch to a divine trio – and yes, some early Christian writers saw the Christian Trinity here – but all he knows is that three men have shown up at Chez Abraham without reservations and it's his job to welcome them.

Which is what he does. He takes the initiative and goes out to meet them while they're still at some distance, while their identity as guest, stranger, or enemy is still to be determined. And it's Abraham's actions that will determine the identity of three men. They will become his guests – no longer strangers and certainly not enemies – because of his actions. By extending hospitality to these three unknown men, Abraham turns them into his guests and he turns himself into their host. Hospitality has the power to change people for the better, which is why the Bible takes hospitality so seriously.

Hospitality establishes a relationship of well-being between people. Hosts are bound to their guests by generosity, and guests are bound to their hosts by gratitude. Those are the complimentary realities that make up the larger reality of hospitality, and when those realities are in play, enmity is at bay. That's how important hospitality is. Now let's go back to the story.

Genesis 18 is a long chapter made up of two parts. The first half – Abraham's treatment of his guests and the promise of a son to Sarah – we read this morning. The second half, which I'd encourage you to read on your own this afternoon, is a conversation between Abraham and the three men about the fate of the city of Sodom, which, it turns out, is the men's destination. These three men are angelic inspectors who've been sent by God to see if things in Sodom really are as bad as they have been reported to God to be. When the men arrive at the city, which we are told about in that famous story in Genesis 19, the reality turns out to be every bit as bad as the rumors. The men are threatened with gang rape by the inhabitants of Sodom, and are saved from that abuse by the intervention of Abraham's nephew, Lot. In what can only be described as a shameful panicked reaction, Lot offers his daughters, instead of his guests, to the mob outside his door, which the Sodomites refuse. The angels strike the mob with blinding lust and deliver Lot and his family from the doomed city the next morning.

Now we all know that Christians have, for centuries, read the story of Sodom's destruction as a statement of God's opinion about homosexuality. But to read the story that way is to read it out of its context, and we all know how dangerous it is to take things out of context. The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 is the inverse of the story of Abraham in Genesis 18 – it's the story of Abraham turned inside out – and its point can only be found by reading it in its biblical context. And that context, as I hope I've made clear so far, is hospitality, not sexuality. Sexuality in the story of Sodom functions only as a tool by which people propose to abuse other people; it has nothing at all to do with relationships of care, dignity, autonomy, and respect. And that's why the story of Sodom has no place in discussions about same-sex relationships; they're about two entirely different things.

Now we don't tend to see that right away for two reasons. The first is because we, as a culture, are obsessed with sex, and so anything having to do with sex, even abusive sex, grabs out attention.

And remember when I said that we don't take hospitality nearly as seriously as the Bible takes hospitality? That's the second reason most of us don't see the point of the Sodom story – or the Abraham story that introduces it. In our hotel culture, we tend to equate hospitality with entertainment – the little black dress and trays of hors d'oeuvres – but in what Karl Barth called “the strange new world of the Bible,” hospitality is literally a matter of life and death. Hospitality, as the story of the three angels shows, elevates people to the level of greatness or reduces us to the level of savages. Hospitality shows us who we really are, regardless of who we think or say we are.

And right now, as a world culture heavily influenced by the United States, we are not doing ourselves proud. The civil wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Ukraine and in so many other places have turned millions of people into refugees, and the political candidate winning primary after primary is the rich man calling for the expulsion of immigrants and the building of a wall to keep the poor and the vulnerable out of our wealthy, privileged, powerful, and increasingly hard-hearted country. We Americans are looking more and more like Sodomites, not because of what we do with our genitals, but because of what we do with our resources. Here's what the prophet Ezekiel said to Jerusalem: “This was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Sound familiar? When we turn our backs on those fleeing countries we ourselves have helped to destroy, we are among the most wicked of sinners and there is no health in us.

Hospitality, friends, is not a party; it's a way of life. Hospitality isn't about inviting your friends over for drinks and nibbles; it's about being the sort of person who makes every person feel welcome in your presence, whether you're at home or in your doctor's waiting room or in the U. S. Capitol building. Genuine Christian hospitality is a manifestation of our spirituality, not our bank accounts, and the people who are often best at practicing hospitality are those with the fewest material resources. Such people often have abundant spiritual resources, however, because they haven't allowed themselves to become, in Harry Emerson Fosdick's words, “rich in things and poor in soul.”

I was speaking with my nephew in Alabama recently about what makes people addicts, whether to alcohol or drugs or pornography or work, and we both concluded that physical addiction has much to do with spiritual poverty. There is a God-shaped hole in the center of each of us that only God, who is Spirit, can fill; and folks who become addicts are attempting to fill that spiritual void with physical things. And because material things cannot ultimately satisfy spiritual needs, people try harder and harder to make that happen, and their addiction grows. There certainly is physical pleasure in

addiction – the hit solves the problem, at least for a time – but at some point in the pleasure cycle every person asks, “Is this it? Is this all there is? Is my life no more meaningful than this?”

At that moment, we all have to make a decision. We either carry on as we are, trying to create meaning for ourselves by stuffing everything we can get our hands on into that God-shaped hole, or we will turn toward the light, and pray for the path to be illumined that God is calling us to walk.

That's the moment we call conversion. It can happen once or it can happen dozens of times over the course of a lifetime, but what matters is how we respond. We can accept God's invitation of divine companionship or we can reject it and go it alone. That choice is ours, not God's, and it makes all the difference. God's invitation is always there, waiting for us to accept it, which is why genuine Christian hospitality is ultimately rooted in God.

You and I and everything we have and are and ever will be are the result of God's generosity. Our being here is an act of God's grace, because none of us has a right to be. Being is a gift, and gifts are always gestures of hospitality. To give is to tell someone that they matter enough for you to have thought about them and to have provided something that you think they'll enjoy and perhaps might even find useful. You took time, devoted thought, and made the effort – that's hospitality. You made someone feel welcome because of what you did – that's hospitality. You risked opening yourself up to another, not out of need, but out of generosity – that's hospitality. In hundreds of ways that have nothing to do with entertaining we can provide hospitality to others by re-gifting ourselves – God's gift to us – to them.

The language of Lent I've used this morning to describe hospitality is accommodation, because hospitality ultimately comes down to accommodating others in our lives, especially those less blessed than we. And as Abraham learned, to accommodate those in need is to accommodate the divine.

“When I was hungry,” Jesus said, “you fed me. Thirsty, and you gave me something to drink.” To practice hospitality in that way – with no hope of repayment, reciprocity, or even recognition – is to invite God into our lives and to accommodate holiness. By doing this, you may not create a better world, but you'll certainly create a better person. And that person will be you.