

July 21, 2013
Genesis 18:1-12
The Last Word
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There is something about the desert. My brief experiences are limited to tours in Jordan and a week in August in Arizona, but the mystique of the hot sun-drowned wilderness stays with me. On one of my Jordan trips, the group was welcomed at a traditional Bedouin encampment. The Bedouin lifestyle has not changed in thousands of years and a key characteristic of that culture is hospitality. People who make the desert their home know the dangers of life in hostile conditions and depend for survival on mutual hospitality.

We were invited into the shade of the tent and offered tea and food just as Abraham had a meal prepared for the visitors. We learned a bit about desert living and about the importance that is placed on the protection that is found within the encampment. Tribes spread throughout the wilderness from Israel/Palestine to Saudi Arabia may have grievances and animosities but all is set aside when a wanderer is welcomed into the tent. The wanderer is fed, cared for, given shelter and security during the stay.

This Biblical story is all about hospitality. It is unclear when Abraham realized that he was entertaining divine beings. What he initially saw was a group of three men standing before him. His immediate response was not to ask who they were, where they had come from and where they were going; rather his response was to provide a meal for the strangers. He asked no questions; he simply issued instructions to his wife and to his servant. He wanted the best to be served to his guests. What he did was not unusual. Guests were provided with the finest food and given the most comfortable seating. And Abraham, himself, served them the food.

Another story that you will recall, is told of the stranger walking with the couple on their way back to Emmaus following the crucifixion of Christ. When they arrived home, the couple invited the stranger in and prepared a meal for him. "And they knew him in the breaking of the bread." There is intimacy and bonding in the act of dining. Like most other couples, Neil and I always go out for a special dinner on our anniversary. Most families gather together for a meal following the Memorial Service of a loved one. The conclusion of a wedding day in every culture is a meal with music and dancing. Joy, laughter, comfort are the threads of that bonding.

So I wonder; was it in the breaking of the bread that Abraham recognized the presence of God? There is a great power at work in the act of hospitality. When we open our doors or our hearts to strangers, we are opening ourselves up to vulnerability but also to new friendships. I have heard many stories from those who went on the Travel Institute trips with George and Nancy Lawrence. Those young people stayed in the homes of total strangers. Those strangers became friends, and often, life long friends. The parents became friends by mail and occasionally trips were taken back and those friendships re-affirmed. Through such experiences, we clearly appreciate that hospitality becomes an act of trust that keeps expanding into ties of friendship and mutual joy. Blessed be those ties that bind.

Take a closer look at the passage. Three strangers appear unannounced at Abraham's tent and are welcomed into the tent. Food is prepared and eaten. Water is

plentiful and refreshing. By the end of the meal, relaxing in the cool of the shade, Abraham has become God's friend. Given the gift of friendship, Abraham will be always faithful and frequently, comfortable with his almighty friend. Yes, there is power in hospitality, the power of love.

Sister Joan Chittister, a theologian and writer reflects on this power, saying:

Hospitality means we take people into the space that is our lives
and our minds and our hearts and our work and our efforts.

Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first
step towards dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality
is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time.

I caution us all to remember that the author of this chapter of Genesis was using words and imagination to express the hand of God at work in the world through Abraham. So we begin to understand the author's message to us of God's care for Abraham and for his descendants. We might say that through his hospitality, Abraham confirmed for God the rightness of God's choice. Abraham, descendent of Adam and Eve, descendent of Noah would be the father of a great people with whom God would be in covenant precisely because of God's willingness to be in friendship with Abraham.

Parker J. Palmer, writer and speaker reflects on hospitality in words that almost echo the relationship between God and Abraham:

Hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than
the guest. The concept of hospitality arose in ancient times when
the reciprocity was easier to see: in nomadic cultures, the food
and shelter one gave to a stranger yesterday is the food and shelter
one hopes to receive from a stranger tomorrow. By offering hospitality,
one participates in the endless reweaving of a social fabric on which
all can depend--thus the gift of sustenance for the guest becomes a
gift of hope for the host.

Hospitality is or should be hardwired into our spiritual selves. It is there in every Gospel. Mary, the mother of Jesus ensures that there will be wine for the wedding. Jesus attends a meal at Zaccheus' home and later feeds 5,000 people. Mary and Martha prepare a meal for the disciples. Jesus and his disciples share a last supper and the risen Christ waits by the side of the lake with a fish fry for the fishing disciples.

Hospitality appears to focus on meals but the open door and the open heart always precede a meal. Here at First Church, we are making hospitality a key element in our life together. We want to celebrate our community through the open door and the hand raised in greeting. With the umbrella of hospitality over our heads, we grow from strangers to friends to community, to family.

We discover the great gifts that hospitality brings: new insights, new energy, new ideas. We discover connections with one another, same school in the same town. Same likes or dislikes. Same favorite books or movies. Same desire to change some aspect of the world. Suddenly we are not so alone in our hopes or visions as Jesus was not alone in his.

In the growing fear and distrust that casts its shadow everywhere including here in Burlington, hospitality is challenged and stretched. Trayvon Martin was killed because of fear. I do not know how we overcome that fear and, in this drug epidemic, it is sometimes justified. But we cannot continue to build walls without putting windows in them. We have to be able to see out beyond fear. Yesterday, I asked a man lying on the grass to leave because there was a wedding about to take place. He was polite and understood but he was also pretty banged up. It is a hard life on the streets. Just as I was leaving, another man arrived on a bicycle. He is, he said, doing God's work in checking up on those who seem to be in some trouble. His was an act of hospitality and I gratefully left him to his good work.

My great fear is that we each build those walls higher and brick up the windows. And in all that building, we lose that precious sense of hospitality.

After the meal, God gave Abraham a gift, "You and Sarah will have a son and through him your descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky or the sands of the desert. So, because of hospitality, Abraham's friend had the last word and it was a blessing. May we keep hospitality in our hearts and in our lives and receive blessings in abundance. Amen.