

Genesis 18: 1-9

The Demands of Hospitality

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The Congregational Church of Needham

During the month of September our sermons will be on the theme of Hospitality. When you think of hospitality you think of welcoming people to your home, or throwing a nice dinner party. You think of family members- a grandparent or favorite uncle - who cooked the very things that made the house smell inviting. You may think of the feel of a neighbor's annual cookout where you know that you settle in with old friends who had become one big family. Or maybe you have a favorite inn or bed and breakfast where you retreat every year and sink into smooth sheets or bite into plump breakfast pastry and forget the calories and all your cares for a few days. Hospitality is the ability to make people feel at home whether they are at a party, away for the weekend, or lounging in your backyard. It is the ability to nourish people so they can rest and relax. For people who entertain or just invite the family over, hospitality is an art.

If you do a google search for the word hospitality you find 23 million hits. But digging into these articles and sites you might assume that the business world invented hospitality. Resorts, real estate offerings, coffee shops, cruises, all ply their business using a hospitality pitch. Reading these sites you would assume that good hospitality is a form of customer service. But hospitality was not invented by schools of hotel management. Like most of our core values it comes originally from the Bible. The story we read in Genesis today sets the gold standard for hospitality in the Bible in all of human history the quintessential example of hospitality is the one we find in Genesis 18, the story of Abraham and Sarah. (It is also the story the children will be studying in Bible Village and Middle School classes for this unit.)

Long ago the Bible says that strangers came to the tent of Abraham and Sarah. These three visitors took the ancient couple by surprise. Seeing the three men approach, Abraham sprang into action. He tells his wife to prepare some good bread- a whole loaf for each of the three guests. Sarah gets to work quickly. Then Abraham walks to his pasture and finds a plump young calf, the kind of animal who would be slaughtered for a special feast. The meal is sumptuous. That menu was not leftovers, or something from the freezer. These three strangers were treated to the best that Abraham has to offer. What can we learn about hospitality from this story for our lives today?

In the first place Abraham and Sarah remind us that our plates are full, not empty. When we think about hospitality it is easy to consider our limits but the Bible says we need to spread an abundant feast. When you imagine having a party you may weigh whether you have the financial or emotional resources to pull it off. You may consider the cost of the liquor, the cost of decorating, the strain on your children. But once you send the invitations you are committed and then you try to pull out the stops and do it right. When Abraham saw the three strangers he decided to offer them his best. That decision was a leap of faith. Think of all the things Abraham might have said instead. Sarah and I only have so much flour; we did not plan to feed three more tonight. We cannot extend ourselves to people we don't even know. They did not make a reservation. We are not prepared for this. We are saving the flour and the calf. Can't we send them to an inn? What if we don't like these people. What if they turn out to be dangerous, or difficult? There are lots of questions you might have before you open your doors to strangers. There are a lot of ways to avoid being a host, or to sidestep real hospitality.

The fact that these strangers showed up when no one expected them, reminds us that that is how life often presents us with opportunities. They come when no one is looking. They come when you are not ready. They come without warning. In those moments we have to decide whether to respond generously or turn away. Life offers us many moments for hospitality, but hospitality is a path that you choose. Many of us turn away from the opportunities, not toward them. Over a year ago I found a story that really impressed me. A woman named Sarah Smiley lives in Bangor with her three boys. Her

husband, Dustin, served in the US Navy and was often deployed overseas for months at a time. In her book, *Dinner with the Smileys*, Sarah wrote that she dreaded these separations, and when her children started to talk nervously about missing daddy Sarah decided to change things. The hardest part of the deployments was the dinners without daddy. One evening at dinner when one of the boys was really sad, she suggested that they invite people to dinner every week while their dad was away. The boys created a wish list of people they wanted to invite; it started with President Obama but they agreed to begin with Senator Susan Collins. To their surprise the Senator accepted. In her book, Sarah Smiley reveals how much she second guessed herself when the senator's office responded that the senator would come one evening for dinner. As the senator's headlights swept her snowy yard the night of the first dinner, Smiley regretted her casualness. She worried about the lasagna, the boy's table manners, and as the doorbell rang she hastily whispered, "No potty humor". But Sen. Collins walked into their living room with all the warmth of a favorite aunt. She pulled the youngest boy onto her lap and he patted her face and rubbed her cheeks. By the end of the lasagna Smiley says she forgot she was entertaining a distinguished member of Congress. For dessert they had some of the Senator's homemade brownies. One of the boys picked the nuts out and carefully piled them on the table, but the Senator took it all in stride. As she was saying good night Smiley worried that a US Senator would be a hard act to follow, but in the months that followed, the Smiley family entertained the Bangor chief of police, a symphony conductor, the local weather man, a baseball historian, some radio DJ's, an Olympic rower, a children's book illustrator and zoo keeper. Practicing hospitality did not bring their father home any faster, but it transformed the experience from one of emptiness to fullness. It brought a new abundance to their home in a time when it would have been easy to hunker down and just survive until Dad returned. Instead of feeling alone, they discovered that they were surrounded by good kind people.

The Bible tells us to reach out to strangers, and to help sojourners. You might assume that we are supposed to reach out to people with this radical hospitality because it is good for the world. But most of

these injunctions in the Bible that are good for others are also good for us. We need to be reminded that our plates are full, and not empty. We need to open ourselves to the new life coming to our gate.

Secondly, hospitality is a holy experience. These strangers at Sarah and Abraham's tent turned out to be messengers from God. They brought good news that God would send the couple a baby. It was startling to hear this prediction and it stretched credibility at their age, but it was the best news they could ever imagine. The Bible says that when you extend yourself to a stranger you find gifts you could not imagine.

There is a tradition in Judaism and in Hinduism that when you entertain a stranger you really entertain God. God is a guest at your table. Quite literally, that is what the story tells us in Genesis and again throughout the New Testament. It was Jesus' custom to sit down with different people almost every night. There was something about those meals that made people feel close to God. What Jesus and Abraham tell us is that whenever you extend ourselves to strangers, God is present. Whenever we offer our best to people we meet without counting the cost, God is there. Whenever we reach out in faith to do the right thing, God is there.

We discovered this truth in our church when we started distributing diapers to local families on the edge of poverty each month. We have served dozens of families over the last seven years and three years ago we expanded the program to include a community dinner. Now we serve 30- 60 busy working parents and their children a nice home-cooked meal every month. It is extra work, but these families have blessed us more than the other way around. It really feels like God is with us on the nights of the community dinners.

Finally, hospitality is a choice. It is not easy to be that open to strangers. The reason it is not easy does not really hinge on the fullness of your larder. We all know that meals can stretch. But the problem with strangers is that they will upset your norm. These strangers came to Sarah and Abraham to tell them that God had heard their prayers. God was going to grant their deepest desire. You might imagine

that this would be the best news possible. But even good news takes a toll on you. Good news upsets you just as much as bad news does.

When Sarah heard the strangers' prediction, she laughed. She laughed because she had cried about too many disappointments for too long. She laughed to push the possibility of another dashed hope aside. She laughed because it was too much. They were settled into their fate. Sarah Smiley might have laughed; she might have stifled her son's sadness. She might have refused to extend herself when she already felt raw and vulnerable. She might have become a victim of her husband's deployment. It would have been easier than starting down a whole new path.

We settle in to our limitations. We embrace our emptiness. We get used to our setbacks. We make peace with problems because it is easier than having our hopes dashed. But sometimes we forget that God hears our prayers and tries to send us messengers with new hope. In a funny way that scares us even more than the notion we have that God is too busy to hear us. God keeps sending messengers to you. God keeps trying to reach you. God may not solve things the way you expect but God does not turn a deaf ear to your supplications. God often has a plan for some new abundance for your life that will draw you into a whole new orbit. Those changes scare us even more than the scarcity we have learned to accept.

God's hope for you is that you will thrive. You will be all you can be. You will find happiness and creative ways to use your gifts. And like them your impact will not be small but large in the life of the world. When you walk in faith with God, God will send you more opportunities than you can imagine. In fact if you look back on your life the opportunities have been knocking at your door for years.

These Bible stories are not miracles from long ago. They teach us that this is how God works in all of our lives. When you pray, God sends answers. When you pray fervently, God sends messengers with new hope. The question then becomes will you welcome those angels who come dressed like strangers? Will you welcome them with open arms?