



## *“Practicing Hospitality”*

Genesis 18:1-10; Acts 4:41-45; John 2:1-11

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

It was high noon in Hebron. It was hot – desert hot. All over the desert, work stopped and everyone rested until the heat eased. Father Abraham came in from the fields with his servants and sat down beneath the large oak trees in front of his house. Mother Sarah closed the kitchen, shooed the servants away, and rested until the rigors of the evening meal.

Quiet hung heavy in the air all over the land. The only sound was the occasional insect buzzing in and out of earshot. Abraham dozed in the warm shade beneath the trees. His world was at rest.

Off in the distance, three strangers walked out of the shimmering heat toward Sarah and Abraham’s house. When they came near the house, Abraham sensed their presence and snapped wide-awake.

Abraham shot up from his chair under the trees and rushed to greet the strangers. He ran to them, fell at their feet, and welcomed them to his home.

In the ancient world – and in much of the world today – hospitality to strangers is one of the highest cultural values. Every guest must be treated like a queen or king.

Prostrate before the strangers, Abraham said, “Welcome to my home.” He got to his feet and shouted for a servant to fetch water for the guests. Dusty feet needed to be washed, and thirsty guests needed a drink. When the water arrived, Abraham knelt and washed the feet of his guests while the servant offered water to drink. Such were the gestures of ancient Hebrew hospitality.

Introductions and ablutions finished, Abraham invited the strangers to sit in the chairs in the shade under the oak trees to rest until the cool of the evening – and if possible spend the night under his roof and continue their journey refreshed in the morning.

The guests seated, Abraham ran into the house and called out, “Sarah, we have guests. A feast must be prepared.” A servant fired up the oven, and Sarah began to bake bread. Abraham ordered another servant to go to the nearest pasture, find the best calf, slaughter it and bring the meat to the kitchen. “And while you’re in the pasture,” Abraham added, “milk one of the cows and bring milk and curds in too.” We must prepare a feast fit for royalty.

Sarah baked away. Servants fetched, prepped and prepared the feast. Abraham entertained the visitors, checked on the preparations, and entertained the guests some more. They might have been caught by surprise, but they would certainly offer these guests the best hospitality in the valley.

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By early evening, the feast was ready. Servants carried the food and wine outside to the waiting guests. Choice veal, bread still warm from the oven, fresh milk with curds, and fine wine loaded the table. The guests ate gratefully.

Abraham stood by anxiously refilling cups and passing food for seconds, treating his guests like royalty and, no doubt feeling good about his efficient household. Sarah, as custom demanded, stayed indoors, but lingered by the door listening to see how the feast was going.

The story moves on to larger issues but stands as a lovely illustration of an ancient custom long lost in the hurry of modern life. Part of the ritual of hospitality, then and sometimes now, is radical and gracious welcome of strangers to one's home.

A number of years ago, I visited the famous cliffs of Sangha in the West African country of Mali. Part of sub-Saharan Africa, life is tenuous and poverty is near universal. Our congregation in partnership with World Relief built a well in the village that was barely sustaining life.

French anthropologists have been studying the people of Sangha for a century and, consequently, there is a primitive hotel on the edge of the village of mud houses. That evening we ate dinner outside in the courtyard of the hotel under a brilliant star-lit sky. Dinner was couscous with goat meat added since we were privileged guests.

The village pastor joined us. Wearing threadbare clothes, his face lined by hardship, he came to welcome us to the village. He told us that though we came from far, far away, we were more than welcome because any Christian in the entire world is part of their family in Sangha.

Far from home, indeed, and a bit nervous about the accommodations, to say nothing of rigors and dangers of the journey, we were feeling vulnerable and alone. Yet this poor man opened his arms and his heart – and his village and received us as family. It was memorable to say the least.

There is another village a thousand years removed from Abraham and Sarah and a world away from West Africa. Cana is the village and it is near Jesus' home in Galilee. We are just in time for a wedding.

Hebrew weddings in the first century were events more than ceremonies. A wedding then was a weeklong feast with family and friends. From morning until night, guests ate good food, drank good wine, and had a very good time. At the end of the week, the groom presented himself at the bride's home and escorted her to their new home. The only ceremony involved was the consummation of the marriage that night.

You know the story in Cana. Jesus' mother, Mary, and Jesus were invited to the wedding at Cana. Jesus arrived several days into the feast and walked into a social disaster in the making. Poor planning and good times had emptied the wine cellar. No greater social humiliation was possible. Mary and Jesus intervened, Jesus produced gallons of vintage wine – so fine it stunned the wine steward – the party continued unabated and the disaster was averted.

It's another story that illustrates the power and value of hospitality. In this case, hospitality is more than entertaining strangers. Here hospitality is a community event in which family and friends are welcomed, provided with food and drink, and given lodging. The hosts opened their doors, their homes, their pocketbooks and, of course, their hearts in a gesture that built and reinforced the bonds that hold families and communities together. All over the world, large events like weddings and funerals create opportunities for hospitality and illustrate human nature at its best.

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Last week, our family experienced the ancient tradition of church hospitality. When we planned Gloria's dad's funeral, the church insisted that they would provide food for all of us. The day before the funeral, loads of food was delivered to the house.

The graveside service was in the morning, and the celebration of Gene's life was scheduled for early afternoon. In between the church fed us. When we arrived at the church, we were welcomed and led to the church basement where long tables were set up for the 50 plus members of the family present.

Three other tables held heaping mounds of home cooked food. We loaded our plates, sat down, and enjoyed the food and the wonderful conversations so often part of the funeral experience. As we ate and talked, church members made sure we were comfortable, and invited us to seconds, even thirds. When we were finished, they boxed up several days' worth of extra food and sent it home with us.

It was a lovely experience, one of the things country churches do so very well. Something much deeper than food and fellowship happened in that church basement. Most of us in the family are outsiders. Gloria and three of her siblings went off from there to see the world and to achieve much. Our family is a wonderful illustration of American success and American social stratification. Where we've gone and what we've achieved often create fear and suspicion back home. All of us have outgrown that church, and they know it.

But for a day, all those barriers were laid aside. Warmly and graciously, they welcomed us back home and offered us the protection of a hospitable community. Church basement hospitality was accompanied by conversations and deepening relationships that would not have happened otherwise. After the meal the conversations and family-building continued in the parking lot and then back at the house. Our entire family is richer because of it.

Christian hospitality is no small thing. Hospitality breaks down barriers and heals wounded hearts. Hospitality creates community, forms families, and builds communities.

And that brings us to Acts 2, another story that includes hospitality. It's a post-Easter story about a community that exists as a consequence of Easter. In fact, the entire New Testament is a consequence of Easter morning.

In a world that was quite hospitable, a new hospitality arose and flourished. I was reading an ancient historian this week who claims that humanly speaking, the rapid rise of the early Christian movement is in part a consequence of their radical hospitality.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, summarizes the post-Easter Christian community in our text. The early Christians were "devoted to" a number of things, but especially, "the fellowship" – their common life together, their shared faith, their new and growing friendship with one another – and equally devoted to "the breaking of bread from house to house."

They spent time together. They lived life together. They ate together. They visited one another's homes. Most hospitality includes food, and early Christian hospitality featured common meals. "Breaking bread" means common meals in each other's homes, but it means much more. "Breaking bread" came to mean the Lord's Table, Holy Communion.

Soon they called these Eucharistic meals "agape feasts." They all brought food – they were first century church potlucks – and at the end of the meal, they celebrated communion with leftover bread and wine.

This hospitality was radical. Everyone was invited to the table. No one was excluded. All the barriers that divided people – race, class, nationality and gender – all fell before the gracious invitation to come eat at the table of the Lord. In hospitality, God was at work in the world and in them, because the Lord Christ visited their common meals to empower and to bless.

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The point is much larger than food. The early church believed and proclaimed that the common table is a sign of a God whose arms are always open to all, without restriction. God's heart is as large as the world, they taught, and in their acts began to live and believe it. They believed, and the church teaches, that God exists (and the church joins God) in order to welcome God's lost children home – no matter who, no matter when, no matter where.

And they believed and proclaimed that God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ, whose life and teaching tore down all those walls that divide, and who invites everyone to come to God's table, the feast of the ages. Jesus' harshest criticism was leveled at those who restricted their table from some folks. "God's not like that," Jesus taught.

Jesus formed a community to be an open-tabled kind of place and people. I've seen that kind of open table. So have you.

I want to tell you about a couple much different than most of us. Loren was a rural mail carrier out west. Peggy was a stay-at-home mom. Together they farmed a small place on which they raised their own food. They were generous people. They let me have as much garden space at their place as I wanted. It's where I first became a vegetable grower! One year we bought a heifer together and slaughtered it in the fall. We had meat for a year.

Every Sunday without fail, Loren and Peggy had people over for Sunday dinner. The meal was radically local – they raised it! The guests varied from week to week. All were welcome from the smallest child to senior citizens. Like their lives and their home, the table was always open and welcoming. I have favorite memories sitting around that eclectic and inclusive table.

Years later, we knew people quite different. Rich was more successful than most the people in the church. He and Doreen were very generous with what they believed God had given them – including a swimming pool to which all the kids in the church were invited. We ate many wonderful meals at Rich and Doreen's. Rich, tall and smiling, tended the grill, while inside, the always laughing Doreen mixed delicious fruit salads. The kids romped in the pool.

Some of our children's happy memories – and formative ones too – are the consequence of that hospitality. In fact, our youngest son occasionally takes his children over to Rich and Doreen's for a swim and a barbeque.

Hospitality for us will not look like Hebron, Cana, Amelia, or Minneapolis. Hospitality must be adapted from culture to culture. My point is larger than meals. Hospitality is, at its heart, a way of being, a way of seeing things, a specific type of character formed by Christian faith.

Our kind of hospitality welcomes strangers, friends and family with an open heart and open arms. It is prompted by a generous spirit that seeks the good of the other as a way of life. Hospitable people refresh others, they don't drain them.

For us, hospitality may be quite counter-cultural. We live in a dangerous world that tends to close doors and lives to others. I heard a psychologist say once that the world changed when we moved from a front porch culture to a back yard fenced-in culture. Remember when adults sat on the front porches of the neighborhood talking to one another and supervising the play of the children? Now we sit in private back yards by ourselves. We seldom talk to our neighbors if we even know them.

Christian congregations create front porches, safe places, welcoming places for adults and children. We live conscious that we are responsible for each other.

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Hospitality begins in families. We need to make our homes a hospitable place for everyone under our roof. Homes must be open, safe, nurturing places, not threatening, angry, alienating places.

Christian hospitality moves quickly from our homes to house to house to Hillis Hall! We belong to a community of generous-hearted people, a place where people connect, share their lives, bare their souls, and unburden their hearts.

In a world that isolates, individualizes, and privatizes, one that uses and disposes of people often without a conscience, where trust and friendship are all too rare, the church is called to a community of friends, people who instinctively turn toward each other, not away.

In the memorable words of Henry David Thoreau, "In a [world] where so many are lonely, it would be inexcusably selfish to be lonely alone."

Perhaps better put, an Arab proverb says:

A friend is one to whom we may pour out all the contents of our heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.

Amen.

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