

“Strangers Among Us”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, October 1, 2023

Texts: Genesis 18: 1-10 and Genesis 23: 1-20

“Three of the world’s major religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) trace their roots back to Abraham. As the only person in scripture described as a ‘friend of God,’ Abraham is still looked to as a paragon of faith (Cooperrider, p115).” God often appeared to Abraham amid trees, including under “the oak of Moreh” when he learns that the land before him will belong to his ancestors. Later, he marks the holy land entrance at a tree, and build his first altar to God under that tree. But this story, happens amid the “oaks of Mamre”, where Abraham not only greets visitors and welcomes them, but together with Sarah, he extends radical hospitality to those visitors. Actually, they aren’t just called visitors, but strangers. Abraham, Sarah and the oaks themselves have something to teach us about hospitality.

We all know how to be hospitable. When a guest comes to our home, we welcome them with open arms, offer them something to drink and perhaps eat, and we invite them to make themselves comfortable. We might take them on a tour of our home, being sure to point out the necessities like restrooms. All the while, we look to treat them with kindness, to meet their needs, to give them a place to belong, and to open our hearts, minds and homes to our guests. Yes, we know how to do hospitality. Well, we know how to do hospitality for those we invite, whom we know...our friends, family and neighbors. No doubt about it.

But these visitors to Abraham are described not as friends, or family, or even neighbors. They are described as strangers. Our scripture reads this way: “Abraham looked up and suddenly he saw three men standing before him (Genesis 18:2).” Then he runs around and does all he can to make them feel welcome. Sarah begins to prepare for them food from the best grain, and then a healthy young calf is prepared for them, and he stands with them under the tree while they ate. He even describes himself to them as “servant”. I’m not sure that would be our reaction if we saw three strangers standing before us at the door of our house.

Daniel Cooperrider, in his book *Speak With the Earth and It Will Teach You*, describes this text as the foundational Biblical text on hospitality. It is told many times throughout the Bible, making hospitality one of the “grand themes and threads of

scripture (p116).” Jesus makes reference in Matthew’s Gospel, saying, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” The Letter to the Hebrews give us a “poetic and concise interpretation”: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). The Quran thinks highly of this story and retells it three times.

The Talmud (the central text of Rabbinic Judaism) claims that when the strangers arrived, Abraham was talking with God. He was deep in private prayer. But when they arrived, he stopped the conversation and offered them hospitality. “This shows, the Talmud argues, that extending hospitality to the stranger is even more important than our private conversations with God. Or perhaps we might think of it this way: extending hospitality to the stranger is the conversation God is always eager to be having with us (Cooperrider, p117).”

We could talk about the social context of the desert and why hospitality may have been more the norm than the exception. Maybe we could talk about how times were different then. People were safer then (history would argue that point). Or maybe we could excuse ourselves by just saying Abraham was “one of a kind” when it came to faith – except Genesis may show quite a human picture of Abraham that isn’t always flattering. Time after time we come up with excuses about why we aren’t able to welcome the stranger the way the Bible expects. For people of faith, however, we are called to wrestle with the call that comes from the Bible, and there are fewer calls that are stronger than the call to radical hospitality.

What do I mean by radical hospitality? Extravagant welcome. In our story for today, Abraham and Sarah “go above and beyond. They go the extra mile.” I’m not sure whether you will be able to do this at home, but I do know that we can do it here, and that really is my point. Churches often think of themselves as welcoming, friendly, even family. But are we radical in our hospitality to the stranger? Do we give them more than they ask for? And do we welcome them expecting little or nothing in return? What if they take too much? What if they stay too long? What if they ask of us more than we have? Do we have enough to share? Will they take advantage of us?

The questions continue.

Here’s the rub: “[Abraham and Sarah] realize the full theological truth of hospitality – that in welcoming strangers, they in fact welcomed God into their midst without even knowing it. In offering food and rest, they learned the ethical wisdom that the other person’s material needs are my spiritual needs (Cooperrider, p118).”

Our theme for this part of the year is about trees. As I mentioned to you before, Abraham and Sarah had many important parts of their life, their encounters with God,

amid trees. Notably in this story, the oak trees of Mamre. Maybe we can learn something from the trees of the Bible, and the trees showing their magnificence all around us. “From an ecological perspective, trees are masters of hospitality, creating the conditions for thousands of other species to flourish. If you picked up a handful of soil from the forest floor and counted up all the little beings there, there would be more life forms in that handful of soil than there are humans on the planet. But even within the tree world, no species has mastered hospitality quite like the oak tree (Cooperrider, p119).”

Daniel Cooperrider relates:

Oak trees are a classic example of a keystone species – one species among which many species in the ecosystem directly depend. Every oak forest is its own biodiversity hot spot. Valley oaks in California, for example, have been documented to support 300 animal species, 1100 plants, 370 fungi, 716 lichens, and 5000 insect and invertebrate species. An oak hosts 534 species of caterpillars. By comparison, a ginkgo tree, common to plant in urban areas, hosts 5 species. A chestnut hosts four.

I don't think it a mistake that the story of radical hospitality takes place among the oaks. I don't think it's a mistake that we have this story of radical hospitality on World Communion Sunday – where we celebrate communion with Christians of every race, color, and sexual orientation, every income and educational status, men, women, and those who identify non-binary. How do we practice radical hospitality across Christianity? I don't think it's a mistake that we have this story of radical hospitality as we begin our drive for the Neighbors in Need offering – supporting Native American tribes, and cleaning up our environment. There's something to be learned here.

The only mistake we could make would be to ignore the lessons before us. Instead, let us be challenged to be as hospitable to the stranger as we possibly can be – especially here at church. It's one thing to say we welcome, and quite another to show our hospitality.

The oak trees, and this story that happens among them, teach us hospitality, both as a way of life marked by extravagant generosity and abundance, and also as a way of seeing – seeing the divine presence, the breath of life, coursing, connecting, commingling in all things, people, trees, caterpillars (Cooperrider, p120).

...And in the church.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.