

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“On Hospitality”

July 18, 2010

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Genesis 18: 1-10a

*18*The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. *2*He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. *3*He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. *4*Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. *5*Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ *6*And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ *7*Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. *8*Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

9 They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ *10*Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Mark 10: 38-42

*38*But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ *39*They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; *40*but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. *42*So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.’

With the passing this week of New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, I recalled my own brief meeting with the controversial man around nine years ago. I have shared this with you before in a children’s message and a Messenger article. I was at the Detroit Tiger Fantasy Camp but in inclement weather had taken a day trip to Tampa where a friend and I found ourselves outside of the Yankees’ minor league facility. I noticed a large black car driving by and the driver appeared to be Steinbrenner. When the car turned around and started coming back toward us, I jumped into the middle of the road and started waving my arms, then pointing at the Tiger logo on my jacket. To my surprise and good fortune, the car stopped, the window went down, and it was indeed George Steinbrenner driving the car. For the next ten minutes I had a conversation with a man I didn’t particularly like and whose team I hated. And I found him delightful. He asked questions about our Fantasy Camp, made some positive comments about the Tigers and agreed to have his picture taken with me. When news of his death was reported

I couldn't help but think of the irony. God taught me about hospitality and welcoming through a person I previously detested-George Steinbrenner!

It was an exceptionally hot day, perhaps like the days of this past week or two. The family was having company over for dinner. Mother asked five-year-old Jason to say the prayer before everyone started eating. "But what should I say?" Jason asked. "Just say what you hear me say around the table," replied Mother. Little Jason bowed his head and said, "Dear Lord, why did I ever invite people over on such a hot day like this?"

Summer tends to be a time of entertaining. It is a time in which we journey and stay with loved ones that we have not seen for some time. It is a time in which we host family and friends who might be visiting us from distant places. This summer my family will have hosted at least three different sets of out-of-town guests. Most of these are friends of mine who are coming to the area to watch the Tigers play. Such hospitality isn't always an easy thing to do. We've all been there! You have to clean the house. You have to launder and change the sheets in the guest bedroom. You have to move Amelia out of her bathroom and prepare it for guests. You have to go to the store and buy something to eat. You have to cook that something to eat.

I found these quotes under the hospitality section of collected wisdom. Arnold Glasow says that "Some folks make you feel at home. Others make you wish you were home." And there is a Swahili proverb which says, "Treat your guest as a guest for two days; on the third day, give him a rake." Hosting and hospitality isn't always easy. It is work. And it is a risk. When we practice hospitality we open ourselves to others. When we practice hospitality, we must be willing to receive others into our lives- without reservation, just as they are.

The two Scripture lessons this morning speak of hospitality offered and the results of such blessed welcoming. In the passage from Genesis, after a conversation with God, Abraham notices three strangers at his door. Abraham is moved to offer them rest and to wash their feet. He then asks his wife Sarah to prepare a fatted calf, bread, curds, and milk for the travelers to enjoy. The strangers react to this hospitality with a prediction. "We will return to you in due season and at that time you will have a son." For the supposedly barren Sarah, this was an outlandish promise. But it came true. The story of Abraham and Sarah links one's hospitality with the creative power and presence of God. The faithful couple showed hospitality, not expecting anything in return, and a miracle happened.

The gospel lesson is one whose story has been often used to teach another message, about doing the one important thing among all the tasks of life that beg for our attention. But as I considered the story this week I also found a great example of hospitality. Jesus, and apparently others were guests in the home of Mary and Martha. Martha appeared to be the expert hostess, drawing water, finding a place for guests to rest, and then preparing a substantial meal. Mary, on the other hand, showed her hospitality in a more unconventional way. She sat down at Jesus' feet and listened to him. She set everything else aside to pay attention to her guest. Both Mary and Martha offered the gift of welcome, embracing the risk of opening their door and their space to others, not knowing if their guest of honor was going to praise their work or condemn them.

Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Martha were all practicing a part of Christian love that we are called to share each day as individuals and as a faith community. God wants our lives to be filled with hospitality. When we welcome others, when we welcome guests, and especially when we welcome strangers, we welcome the presence of God. When God is welcomed some magical, transforming, wonderful things can happen.

Hospitality is a risk. You open your door and your lives to those unlike you. Jesus was probably not the ideal guest. He sat down at people's tables, ate their food, began to teach and then even critique your faith. Jesus' hosts didn't know if he was going to praise them or condemn them. Several years ago the church I was serving in Salt Lake City agreed to share our building for a 14 months with a larger United Methodist Church that was under re-construction. The people of my congregation were worried about what might happen. We

began to worry about whether or not we would measure up to our guests' expectations. We suddenly became more aware of our dirty windows, our threadbare carpet, and the pigeons who constantly roosted on the roof of our sanctuary. What would these outsiders think of our building? I suppose that is why all of us quickly try to clean our houses before our guests arrive. We are concerned what they might think of us. Yet true hospitality doesn't mean you must have it or be a perfect host. You must simply understand the goodness of who you are and be willing to offer of what you do have.

Hospitality also involved another risk- the risk of making space in your life for another, for someone different, for change. William Willimon writes that "the problem with making space in our lives for the other is that the other tends to be so...other." Knock, knock. Who's there? Perhaps we had better check before we open the door and let them in. We are more comfortable reaching out to those who are just like us, following what sociologist Robert Bellah calls, "the narcissism of similarity."

Mother Teresa was once asked, "What is the biggest problem in the world today?" Without hesitating she answered, "The biggest problem is that we draw the circle of our family too small. We need to draw it larger each day." Hospitality implies the risk of tearing down your fences, of expanding your horizons, and of drawing your circle of acceptance just a bit larger.

Kathlyn James, a Methodist minister in the state of Washington was told by a teacher to try a new spiritual exercise called "cultural plunges." The idea was to put yourself intentionally in an environment that is strange to you, again and again. Soon your natural hostility toward change and toward people different from you will fall away. You will start to realize that all people, even if they look and act differently, are just people like yourself. Each month James tried something new. She went to the racetrack and joined the crowd watching and betting on the horses. She went to a midnight showing of "Rocky Horror Picture Show" where the audience came in costume and sang along with the film. She participated in a Native American sweat lodge, a Star Trek convention, and a meeting of the African Violet Society. She found it worked. It was a wonderful way of expanding her horizons and becoming more accepting and welcoming of those different than her.

Hospitality is first modeled by our God. God took the welcoming risk, receiving each of us through the gift of Jesus the Christ. Through Jesus, God accepts us as we are and God becomes more real to our limited human understanding. We take the risk of hospitality when we follow God's intention as we see it in Jesus. It is Jesus who knocks on the door of our hearts, asking us to allow him a little room to enter the priorities of our life, asking us to open us enough to leave room for change in God's name.

A group of Protestant women once attended a retreat at a Benedictine monastery. On the first day they met with the abbot to learn about the daily life there. One woman asked, "What exactly do you all do here?" The abbot replied, "We pray five times a day and practice hospitality." Puzzled the woman responded, "But what is it that you actually do?" The abbot said again, "We pray five times a day and we practice hospitality." Still not satisfied the woman questioned, "O.K., but what do you do with the rest of your time?" The abbot took a deep breath, looked her in the eye and said, "We pray and practice hospitality." Finally the woman began to understand. This is what the community felt called by God to do. It was the essential task and this was more than enough to keep them busy.

Hospitality becomes a test of our godliness and discipleship. It requires us to reach beyond our selfish nature and our desire to remain just as we are. Only those who humble themselves and seek God will have the resources to show hospitality and give of themselves expecting nothing in return. In faith, we are called to take the risk, of opening ourselves to the presence of another, trusting that something good may come. In faith we are called to take the risk, expanding our awareness to make room for the gifts that others, even strangers might bring.

