

Practicing Radical Hospitality
Genesis 18:1-8
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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What is hospitality? Is it a smile and handshake when someone walks into your place of business? Is it a plate of homemade cookies delivered to a new neighbor down the street? Is it a holiday table brimming with enough food to feed a small country? Is it communion shared between strangers in a worship service?

There is a Netflix comedy that I've been watching recently in which the main characters are a family who was wealthy but lost everything. While their rich friends didn't even call and check on them, the residents of a small town in which they end up living receive them openly. There, in spite of their new economic status, they have a place to live, food to eat, and people who just keep showing up for them (often in spite of their own attitudes and actions). Is that what hospitality is?

As we move toward fall and get back to regular programming and ministries around the church, as we begin a new program year, our Ministry Visioning Team has challenged us to embrace the theme: *practicing radical hospitality*. This means, while we won't always be talking about it explicitly, we will be exploring it in various ways, conversations, and experiences in the coming year.

So, we start that conversation today with a story from early in the Bible, from Genesis. This is one of the earliest stories of hospitality in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

And, if you are one of those who is familiar with the Bible, you might be curious about why we only read the first eight verses of this story. After all, these verses are really part of a greater whole...part of the story of the promise to Abraham and Sarah about their descendants...the

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story that affirms for Abraham and Sarah that this promise involves the child Sarah will have (yes, even at her old age), the child we know as Isaac.

So, typically we hear these verses about the three visitors really as being about what comes next. If we know the story, we know that three strangers show up and we know that Abraham offers hospitality, but honestly we are usually so focused on moving ahead to the reiteration of the promise and to the reminder that Sarah will actually give birth and then, finally, moving ahead to Isaac's arrival...we are so focused there that we really just read past the hospitality that is offered.

So, today I'm asking us to pause...because hospitality is no small thing. Rather it is foundational to our story of faith. Both the hospitality shared between God and humanity and the hospitality offered human-to-human play such a large part in our story that we can't afford to *not* stop and talk about it.

So, let's look again at this passage from Genesis. Chapter 18 begins saying, "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. 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. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 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."¹

And then the passage goes on to detail the meal that Abraham and his household make for these guests – a meal of bread and meat and more, a meal that is abundant.

¹ Genesis 18:1-5, NRSV.

Of course, some of you may simply be saying that this is the Middle Eastern way, that Middle Eastern culture, then and still today, understands hospitality as a responsibility not an option. And some of us may feel like that potentially makes it less genuine – turns it into a task to mark off the list, a chore to do. But the reality is that the good side to a sense of responsibility is that it gets built into us.

Just think about it. When we have small children around, we teach them to say things like “Thank you” and “I’m sorry.” We teach it. We model it. In this way, we show that it is a responsibility. But at some point we, as parents and other nurturing adults, step back and see if it has taken root. Because we know that just saying the words isn’t the same as feeling gratitude or regret. Rather, when we see it not only as a scripted response, but as a heartfelt expression, we cheer that on because we know that this responsibility that we have to say things like “I’m sorry” and “thank you” has taken root, has become real. So it is with hospitality.

Yes, Middle Eastern culture does have a greater sense of responsibility toward the stranger and those in need than many others. And yes, it can still be deeply genuine.

And, because we so often read past the early verses in this chapter on the way to the announcement about Isaac, we also miss that Abraham’s hospitality appears to be more than just the minimum requirement of his culture.

In fact, “The midrash [an ancient commentary or interpretation of the Biblical text that fills in the gaps and helps with understanding] presents the biblical patriarch Abraham as the paragon of hospitality, because of his reception of wayfarers in Genesis 18. His position at the entrance of his tent in the midday heat is interpreted as a proactive seeking out of passing

travelers. Other elements of this story, too, contribute to Abraham's reputation: his eagerness, his largesse, and his insistence on seeing his guests off as they departed."²

So, here is Abraham – the great patriarch of Judaism – not just offering a little food and drink, rest for the weary traveler, but running to greet the visitors, bowing to them, offering the best of what he has, welcoming them into the shade of a nearby tree as he waited on them. Welcome, water, food, rest, and more – Abraham offers a full picture of hospitality.

So, what do *we* do with this as we commit again and again to *practicing radical hospitality*?

Well, we practice – we do it over and over again and we do it the best we can in the way we want it to be done. We keep on doing it – even on the days when it feels simply like a responsibility. We keep on doing it – whether we feel it or not. Because much like playing a new song on the piano or shooting a free throw, the muscle memory of our hands and hearts helps us to embody hospitality.

And, that takes us to the word radical. Radical, which we often only think of as extreme or above and beyond, at its core means: to let something take root. So, the more we practice, the more it becomes part of us, the more we get back to the core, the foundation of Judeo-Christian tradition. And when hospitality becomes part of us, then we can embrace it as both a responsibility and a joy! And often, especially when we let it become a joy, we will do it in wonderful and extreme ways.

So, what is this hospitality we are called to offer? Most of us probably first think of food. Food and welcome. And sometimes that is true. We might make muffins or clean our homes in preparation for receiving people, but it is more than that. Hospitality is a position of the heart. It

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-hospitality>

is a position that says that we are open, that what we have is ours to share, that we can see beyond ourselves to the needs and comforts and care of others. And hospitality doesn't always look the same.

I am aware in my own life of two recent experiences when I was given the opportunity to practice hospitality. Just two nights ago, my family and I hosted a cookout for others from the church. About 35 people attended. It was one of those common opportunities for hospitality. You know the type – when we sweep the floors and clean the bathrooms and prepare the food in advance of peoples' arrival. We set a time and then open the door with a smile, ready to welcome them in.

But hospitality doesn't always happen that way. I also recently had someone come to the church needing help. I didn't know they were coming. I didn't get to choose the time, nor was it really convenient. But, suddenly, there they were. In need of some financial assistance. Now many people might first use the word benevolence or service or mission for this opportunity to respond. But I became aware that while that financial assistance was important, so was the hospitality offered in creating space for a person to be heard, to share their story, to be believed.

Opportunities for hospitality are everywhere. Maybe we start by practicing it in the predictable places, by being intentional about looking for ways to share a meal or open our homes or just listen to someone who is struggling. And maybe we begin by paying attention to the many ways and places hospitality is offered to us, from a door being held open to a hand being offered to a meal being shared with us.

And maybe, just maybe, the more we practice it, the more it becomes part of us – rooted deep within us, and the more we discover that opportunities for hospitality are all around us – if we will just open our eyes, our hearts, and our lives. May it be so.