

A Ministry of Welcome

Genesis 18:1-15
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May 22, 2011

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Abraham and Sarah are our best role models when it comes to understanding a ministry of welcome. The Genesis storyteller wants us to number hospitality among the highest of all religious values. As this Hebrew couple welcomes strangers, they realize they are welcoming angels! In welcoming these travelers, Abraham and Sarah assume it is the travelers who will benefit from their hospitality, and indeed they do! A tasty feast is prepared! Yet, it is the hosts, themselves, who are transformed by the welcome. Such is the mystery dimension of hospitality. The one who offers it ends up being the one who is truly blessed!

I like this ancient story from Genesis because it is so graphic, so easy to picture. There is Abraham sitting outside in his Adirondack chair. Not much is happening. He's a little bored. Before he sees the strangers coming, he sees a cloud of dust rising from the path. His curiosity is peaked. When he determines these are two-legged creatures, human in form, he raises himself from the chair and hurries out to greet them. Perhaps they have some news from the next town. The thought of entertaining some drop-in company lights a spark in him. It doesn't matter who they are; they're visitors, and visitors are to be welcomed!

Calling out to Sarah, Abraham sets in motion the makings of a fine stew and a fresh loaf of bread, a meal fit for royalty. She kneads the bread dough and he barbeques the meat. Can you picture the scene? The guests are lounging on the porch, sniffing the aroma of food cooking. One of the strangers asks the whereabouts of Abraham's wife. Then this same stranger makes an unexpected announcement.

When he returns next spring, Sarah will have a child! A child! At her advanced age! She hears this announcement through the thin walls of the tent and she bursts out laughing! Me? Have a baby? Now?

After the meal, the travelers continue along their way, and we are left to imagine the pillow talk between Sarah and Abraham. Who **were** those visitors? Mere humans? Angels? Messengers from God? There they sit; side by side, alive to the surprise announcement and alive to the future and alive in a way they had never been alive before. They recall together how God had promised them off-spring, and how they had pretty much given up on that promise. It had become to them an empty promise. But now hope has breathed upon the dying embers; a flame of Spirit infuses them. A new chapter in their book is about to be written. In the context of hospitality, God's promise to this couple is confirmed! It's like an Easter day!

I've often wondered how the story would have turned out if Abraham had ignored the strangers or maybe just waved to them as they passed by. If he hadn't invited them to stay for supper, they may have missed out on the joy of being in the presence of angels!

Over the last 35 years, South Church families have chosen to be like Abraham and Sarah, have chosen to welcome the stranger from Vietnam, to offer hospitality to the ones coming from Azerbaijan, to extend a dinner invitation to Bosnian families looking for a new home. This extravagant ministry of welcome has been a blessing to everyone involved. We are all the richer for it because our visitors turned out to be angels, because our visitors had stories to tell about their faith and their hopes and their dreams, because our visitors opened our eyes to see the global village, to see that God has many names, speaks many languages, dances many dances, is revealed in many cultures.

I have often said how grateful I am for the ministers who came before me. Their names are on the board in the narthex: Ramaker, Reitingner, Hoskins, Stevens, Stipp. I am so aware of how they planted the seeds and cultivated the congregation. Now, I have the joy of reaping the harvest of their work. Today, I am grateful for a different list of names; all the families who fled their homes in distant lands and chose to come to America for a fresh start. Their names are printed in the bulletin: Zora, Drago, Valarei, Nora, Džadanka, Zorin. You can read them all! I am grateful for these families because they deepened our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God. They taught us about courage. They modeled for us what it means to have a humble spirit, to trust in a Higher Power.

In offering a ministry of welcome, I am sure we thought we were going to be enriching the lives of others. That's what Abraham and Sarah thought! We could not have known how our own lives would be transformed. Just ask Jill and Jerry Grieveson, Tom and Bonnie Mountz, David Robinson and Barbara Barnes, Bob and Judy Benton, Jenn Zito and Michael Rosadino, Jean Partridge, Joyce Allen, Anne and Walter Buckingham. These and many others can bear witness to the simple truth that strangers turn out to be angels, that refugees turn out to be bearers of God's grace, that sojourners turn out to be teachers of the things that really matter.

Moses reminds his community that they were once sojourners in a foreign land, that they were once welcomed by people quite different from themselves. Therefore, he urges them to be open to the stranger who knocks upon their door. Who knows? It may be an angel arriving with a blessing!

Sometimes, I fantasize South Church being that tent where Abraham and Sarah live. The dusty path is Main Street. Along come some visitors, pulling into the parking lot.

In my fantasy, the usher at the back calls to the usher in the front saying, ‘put on the coffee; sprinkle powdered sugar on the muffins; strangers are coming!’ They park their car, come inside, and write a joy into the Book of Joys and Concerns. A birth is about to take place, maybe not that very day but by the following spring, the birth of some new mission, some new ministry, some new support group, some new opportunity to encounter God. The strangers enjoy the coffee and the muffins, then move on. Though they never return, their birth announcement gives light and life to this congregation such that we are all alive in ways we had not imagined!

Such is the mystery of a ministry of welcome. In the greatest of hope, Amen!