

**Creative Hospitality**

June 14, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15

*<sup>1</sup> One hot summer afternoon Abraham was sitting by the entrance to his tent near the sacred trees of Mamre, when the LORD appeared to him. <sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. He quickly ran to meet them, bowed with his face to the ground, <sup>3</sup> and said, "Please come to my home where I can serve you. <sup>4</sup> I'll have some water brought, so you can wash your feet, then you can rest under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me get you some food to give you strength before you leave. I would be honored to serve you."*

*"Thank you very much," they answered. "We accept your offer."*

*<sup>6</sup> Abraham quickly went to his tent and said to Sarah, "Hurry! Get a large sack of flour and make some bread." <sup>7</sup> After saying this, he rushed off to his herd of cattle and picked out one of the best calves, which his servant quickly prepared. <sup>8</sup> He then served his guests some yogurt and milk together with the meat. While they were eating, he stood near them under the trees, <sup>9</sup> and they asked, "Where is your wife Sarah?"*

*"She is right there in the tent," Abraham answered.*

*<sup>10</sup> One of the guests was the LORD, and he said, "I'll come back about this time next year, and when I do, Sarah will already have a son."*

*Sarah was behind Abraham, listening at the entrance to the tent. <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were very old, and Sarah was well past the age for having children. <sup>12</sup> So she laughed and said to herself, "Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, will I really know such happiness?"*

<sup>13</sup> The LORD asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Does she doubt that she can have a child in her old age?" <sup>14</sup> I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me. I'll come back next year at the time I promised, and Sarah will already have a son." <sup>15</sup> Sarah was so frightened that she lied and said, "I didn't laugh."

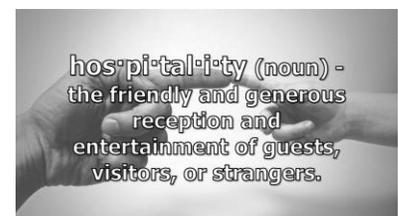
"Yes, you did!" he answered.



As we begin week three of our sermon series on "God's Creative Connection" we encounter Abraham and Sarah.

Our passage today comes from Genesis 18, but their story begins in Genesis 12, when God promises them a child and to make them into a great nation. It is years later, in Genesis 15, when Abraham questions the original promise and in response God covenants with Abraham to give him descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. But the years continue to pass, and the covenant promise goes unfulfilled. So Sarah intercedes to produce a child for Abraham through her slave girl Hagar. Ishmael is born in Genesis 16 and in chapter 17 God again reiterates the covenant and the promise of the land to Abraham's future generations. Abraham is 99 years old at this point; Sarah is 89 years old. Even though Abraham is old and Sarah is well past child bearing years, the promise is soon to come to fruition. That brings us up to speed as we delve into today's passage. As we prepare to do so, let us pray...

Today's passage is the story of creative and radical hospitality. The dictionary defines hospitality as "*the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers*".



As we begin this morning, I invite you to consider a time when you experienced someone else's friendly or generous hospitality... The memory that came to my mind comes from way back when Kristin and I were first married. We went to visit Germany and Switzerland. We bought Euro Rail passes and lived out of one backpack. In one of the tiny Swiss towns where we stayed at a Bed and Breakfast and the owner was an elderly woman who did not speak any English. Breakfast was served from 7 to 10 AM, but we had to catch a train at 6 AM to complete our next day's adventure. That night we tried to explain to her that we would not be there for breakfast. We did not want her to cook for two people who would not be there. A young woman who worked there intervened and explained the situation to the innkeeper. When we went up to bed, we thought we had it all settled. But then, when we crept downstairs at about 5:15, we met the elderly woman waiting for us - with two sacks, one in each hand. She had gotten up extra early and made us breakfast to go. I can still see her smiling face almost thirty years later. That was some radical hospitality. Does anyone else want to share their story of generous or friendly or extravagant hospitality?

The idea of exceptional and creative hospitality is at the center of our passage from Genesis 18. Throughout the relationship between God and Abraham, we see a God who is creative in the way he fashions opportunities to be hospitable to Abraham and Sarah. Chapters 12 through 17, as I briefly reviewed at the beginning of the message, are full of examples where God and/or Abraham receives and entertains others. Within our text for this morning, the creative hospitality goes both ways as well. We will first look at the hospitality that Abraham offers to his three guests and then we will look at how God has modeled hospitality throughout the relationship with Abraham and Sarah.

Our story today begins with Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent when the Lord appears to him. Looking up, he sees three men standing nearby. How many times have you experienced something similar? How often have you looked up and saw someone or a group of people standing there? At the beginning of the passage, it does not seem like Abraham knows that God is present. It is later revealed in verse fourteen, but at this point I do not think either Abraham or Sarah realize that they are in God's presence. But notice how Abraham responds in verse two when he realizes that he has guests. In verse two we note that Abraham ran quickly to greet the men and bowed his face to the ground – a sign of respect. He invites them to share a meal and offers water to wash their feet and a place to rest in the shade of the tree – all signs of respect. As Abraham offers food to strengthen them for their journey he says, *"It would be an honor to serve you"*. From our perspective, all this for three men who are apparent strangers. All this for three men who just happen to appear on the scene one day. But in the culture of the time, one was supposed to be hospitable. This was simply how one treated a guest – or even a stranger. The water, the rest, the water to wash, the food – all were signs of respect and hospitality. There is something powerful in the way that Abraham cares for these three men. It is indeed a friendly and generous reception of these guests, visitors, or strangers.



Abraham does not just give the men a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a bottle of water and then send them on their way. Perhaps that is what you or I would do if a stranger came knocking at our door. Perhaps that is even more than we would do too, right? Abraham asks Sarah to make fresh bread – in the translation that I read from at home he even tells her to use *"choice flour"*.

And then he himself selects one of the best calves from the herd. A calf would have been an exceptional gift – usually one would serve a lesser animal to guests, perhaps a sheep or a goat. Cattle were very valuable and were reserved for special events like a wedding or other very special occasion. And then Abraham offers them some yogurt and milk – also both precious commodities.

So, my friends, this is no PB & J offering. It is ribeye steak and twice-baked potatoes with fresh rolls and a yummy side of Jello salad. It is a fine meal fit for an honored guest. Can you imagine if this is how we treated the one who approached us to solicit a few dollars for a meal or who came asking for help with the heating bill? In your mind, can you imagine inviting said person to come on inside, to have a hot shower, to relax on the couch in the nice air conditioning while you whipped up a nice, home-cooked, hot meal for them? That would be the modern-day equivalent of what Abraham did for these three men.

Now, we still practice hospitality today. But in our time and lives, we practice it in a very planned out and organized way. If even a friend shows up unexpectedly, we would probably invite them in and maybe offer them a glass of water. The purpose of inviting them in would be to discern why they stopped by – to see what they needed. When we practice hospitality today, it is because we planned to do so. We have made our guest list and we have extended invitations to those we hope to have in attendance. For me, I enjoy the cooking and other the preparations for my guests. We will even run the vacuum and clean the bathrooms. Whether fancy or informal our hospitality is designed to create space to be in connection, to make our guests feel welcomed, to provide opportunity

for conversation and to develop relationships. These same purposes were on Abraham's heart and mind as he offered water and shelter and rest and food to his unexpected guests. Connection, welcome, conversation, relationship – what if all of our encounters with others always offered these wonderful dynamics?



As the three men are enjoying the wonderful feast, one asks Abraham, *"Where is your wife Sarah?"* Do you think that the naming of his wife alerted Abraham to that fact that these men were not simply three random strangers who happened to be wandering by? Knowing she is nearby, one of the guests, who is identified as God in verse ten, tells Abraham and Sarah indirectly, *"I'll come back about this time next year, and when I do, Sarah will already have a son"*. Being 89 years old, Sarah laughs to herself and thinks, *"Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, will I really know such happiness?"* Really, can you blame her? She clearly does not know that the man speaking is God.

In what I hear as a perturbed voice, God asks Abraham, *"Why did Sarah laugh?"* God goes on to inform them both, *"Does she doubt that she can have a child in her old age? I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me"*. Gulp. I bet Sarah felt like we feel when we say something that we shouldn't - with that person standing right behind us. Frightened and embarrassed, Sarah makes a hasty retreat. Her denial of her laughter parallels her lack of faith. But God already knows about her barrenness, her humiliation, her disbelief. So, in his own creative way, God is offering friendly and generous reception to Sarah. In his own creative way, God is letting Sarah know that she too is loved.

Are we not extending the same reception, are we not doing the same thing when we extend hospitality to the men, women, and children who happen by in our lives? When we do so, are we not by proxy offering hospitality to God himself? As Jesus said in Matthew 25:40, "*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me*". When we extend hospitality to those outside of our guest list, to those who are not just like us, to those who show up unexpectedly, we are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Yes, we may be treading on unfamiliar and often uncomfortable ground. Yes, we may be taking risk and being vulnerable. Yet isn't this is how God extends himself – with risk and vulnerability - every time he extends hospitality and welcome to us?

God extended hospitality to Abraham and Sarah by stopping by their tent, by caring about their lives, by being interested in their desires, by tending to their deepest needs and their injured faith. It is divine favor that brings life and hope to Sarah's barren womb, that brings new possibilities to both Abraham and Sarah. It is this same divine love that shows up at our doors, who enters our sanctuary, who brings life-giving favor to each of our lives. In this sense, it is the same voice that says to each of us: "*I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me*". Like Sarah, when we hear and imagine what that voice could mean, we too gulp. Has that not been our response too?

The reality is that what was true for Abraham and Sarah is true for each of us as well. When we ask, 'Is there anything too wonderful for God?' we too must confess that the answer is "no". No, there is nothing too wonderful for God.

We gulp when we consider the truth of our answer. Nothing is too difficult for God. Nothing is outside the realm of possibilities with God. So, my friends, when you find yourself in a place with a stranger knocking at your door or approaching you on the street, will you look to God with a trusting faith and step into the opportunity that God provides, eager to see how God will work in and through you? Or... will you, like Sarah, acknowledge that you have stepped into sacred space and yet deny the possibility of what God can do by doubting or by choosing not to engage in what or with whom has been placed before you? Or... will you open the door that God is providing, opening the door to your heart as you faithfully step into a relationship that has God-sized possibilities?

Having a baby at 90 years of age was pretty amazing. Imagine what the rest of their lives would have been like if Abraham had not extended some radical and generous hospitality to the three strangers who stopped by the tent. When God comes knocking on your door and opens the possibility of new life and new hope in and through you, what kind of creative hospitality will you offer the stranger in your midst? Now, you might not have a baby at 90. But, remember, is there anything too wonderful for God?

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) Grow. When have you had the opportunity to offer generous hospitality and passed it by? What can change in your faith that would allow you to step into the next opportunity that God provides?
- 2) Pray. Today in our nation and community we have a tremendous opportunity to pray for healing and unity. Please do so this week.
- 3) Study. Read Matthew 25:31-46. How does this passage inform the way you understand and practice offering creative hospitality?