

Welcoming the Stranger
Genesis 18:1–10a; Luke 10:38–42
Sunday, July 17, 2022

Let us pray: Open our hearts and minds to your word, Lord, that our hearts and minds might be open to *you* and to *one another*, in Christ. Amen.

These two scripture readings are stories of *hospitality*. And hospitality is not just *entertaining* people, as we have come to think about it. The word *hospitality* derives from the Latin word *hospes*, which means, “host, guest, stranger.” It is about the relationship between a host and a guest. *Hospes* is formed from the word *hostis* which means, “stranger,” or, “enemy.” The historic (and biblical) understanding of hospitality is welcoming a stranger by offering them food, shelter, and safety. So hospitality is not just about welcoming our friends and family, the people that we know and like. It is more deeply about welcoming the *stranger*; taking them in and treating them like a member of your own family.

Our Elders were actually talking about this at a Session meeting back in June, and one of them shared a story that has really stuck with me since then. So I would like to invite Susanne Engheta to come up and share her story with you.

Susanne: Many of you know that I came to the U.S. in my early 20's in 1977. It was an extremely exciting time for me! It was also an earth-shattering experience to be separated from my family, friends, country, culture and my language, anything and everything that was familiar to me was gone! Remember at that time there was no internet, Google or YouTube for instant information. It was like landing in another planet alone and without a travel book. I had come to learn English, and was registered in a language school in downtown Los Angeles.

After a while I started feeling really homesick, I missed my family and friends, nothing looked familiar, I had nobody to go to as a friend. The place that I belonged to was 10,000 miles away and I didn't feel I had any part in this new place. No one cared if I was dead or alive. It was especially upsetting because I had not found any American friends, as I had promised myself back in Iran. Because the Americans wouldn't go to the same school as mine to learn English as a second language, would they? I hadn't thought about that!

One day I went to my teacher and asked her if she knew any Americans that I could meet. A few days later, she told me that she had found a family who would like to invite me to their home on the coming weekend. Their home was in Santa Monica, and I was in downtown LA. I got on the bus and an hour later I arrived. It was a lovely home of a Methodist pastor and his wife. They showed me kindness and hospitality that day. But now I was faced with a new problem; I now had to talk to these people – in English! – with my very limited vocabulary. But in truth, I was so happy to finally know some real Americans! The family offered me to stay overnight after dinner instead of catching the bus back to LA. And I accepted. They said in the morning they would go to church and asked if I wanted to join them. I said sure, not knowing what church was or what time I had to wake up for it. To my dismay, I had to wake up at 7 am and go to church. Those day my preferred time to rise on Sunday mornings was in the afternoon.

I found Church to be an interesting place! Everything was very organized, and the people were ALL Americans! I liked that! But I didn't get anything from the talks, sermon, etc., and it didn't matter to me. I just wanted to be with my new friends. I was an atheist and had no interest in any religion! That was the effect of the one that I grew up with. And as far as I knew Christianity was another version of the same thing.

They invited me more and I got to meet a few people in my own age group from this church. With the existence of these new friends in my life I lost the feelings of homesickness, isolation, and loneliness. I started feeling like I do belong to this place, I could be a part of this community because I have these friends and I am not alone. All along, I was wondering why? Why were they so kind and loving to me? Why was I important to them?

I knew it must have had something to do with their religion. I had expected the opposite, which was what I was familiar with: a faithful person should not mingle with the infidels. But these Christians were not avoiding me, and they knew that I was a non-believer. So it must be in their religion to welcome those who are different instead of avoiding them. I became curious and started asking questions. A couple of years later, someone gave me a bible and wanted me to read a chapter called Matthew. I did! There I found out why the Christians were so different. They learned to love, and forgive and welcome strangers because Christ was loving, forgiving, and welcoming. This was not another version of what I grew up with. Not at all! This was very different!

I accepted Christ in 1980. Years later when I had formed my own family, I found this church where I raised my children in it, with the same doctrine of Christianity: love, forgive, and welcome others.

Loneliness, and isolation are very cold and painful feelings! Unexpected love from strangers when one needs it most, makes all the difference in the world. It makes one feel she belongs.

In the act of welcoming the stranger, we welcome Christ.

Abraham welcomed these three strangers. The story starts off with an interesting detail that a lot of times we miss. The very first thing it says is, “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.” *The Lord* appeared to Abraham. And then it says, “He looked up and saw three men standing near him.” Now, we don’t know who those three men *are*. They’re never named. Some Christians draw the conclusion that this is a physical manifestation of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and while that’s certainly *possible*, it’s not *necessary* for our understanding of this story. We don’t know *who* they are. And that’s the point. They’re strangers. Abraham does not know them any more than *we* do. But he still *welcomes* them. And in welcoming these strangers, unbeknownst to him, he welcomes the Lord.

Mary and Martha welcomed Jesus into their home. You might say, “But Jesus wasn’t a *stranger* to Mary and Martha. They *knew* him.” Well, if we’re only looking at Luke’s gospel, this is the first time Mary and Martha are mentioned. It might have been the first time that they *met* Jesus. He *might have been* a stranger to him. But more importantly than that, Jesus is not *a* stranger, Christ is *the* stranger. What do I mean by that? Jesus tells a parable where he says, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” They say, “Lord, *when was it* that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” And Jesus says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” As we do to the *stranger*, we do to *Christ*.

In Christ, all the strangers in our lives are identified. Christ, in this story, is representative of *all* the strangers in our lives, and all the strangers in our lives are representative of Christ. In the act of welcoming the stranger, we welcome Christ. Like it says in the book of Hebrews, “Do not

neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

There are two interesting connections in *these* stories with the story we heard last week, the Good Samaritan. In that story, a man was beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest comes by and sees him, but he passes by on the other side of the road. Then a Levite (who is like a priest) sees him, and *he* passes by on the other side of the road. Then a Samaritan, who this man would not have associated with *at all*, sees him and does *not* pass him by. He *helps* him and provides him with food and shelter and safety, showing hospitality to a complete stranger. In Abraham’s story, when he sees these three strangers, he runs out to meet them, bows down to the ground, and says, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not *pass by* your servant.” He asks *them* not to pass *him* by. Hold on to that, we’ll come back to it.

One of the points of the Good Samaritan story is that the priest and the Levite *knew* the word of God – these were religious leaders, they *knew* God’s word – but they didn’t *do* it. In Mary and Martha’s story, Martha is busy running around making preparations, getting the food ready, making sure everything is perfect for Jesus, while her sister Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to the Word of God. Martha was so busy *doing* that she didn’t *hear*. So one story is about *hearing* and not *doing*, while the other story is about *doing* but not *hearing*. And you need *both*.

Perhaps God is saying to us through these stories, “Don’t be so busy *doing* that you *pass by* the stranger in need of help.” Because when we *do* that, we are passing by *Christ*.

Now, the *challenge* is, we live in a culture of “stranger danger,” where we teach our children from a very early age not to talk to strangers. And with good reason. We don’t want them to get hurt or abducted or anything like that. But what this has done is to create a culture in which we view *strangers* as *dangerous*; as a *threat*. Any strangers, *all* strangers are viewed with *suspicion* and perhaps *fear*. We have been taught to be *afraid* of strangers, and that develops into being afraid of people who do not *look* or *sound* or *act* like we do.

We *do* have to be discerning. *Some* strangers *are* dangerous. Most are *not*. But we have to be discerning, like Jesus says, “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Jesus calls us to be discerning, *not* fearful. Because the real *danger* with strangers is that we risk not *seeing* and *servicing* Christ. We trust that *God* will take care of *us* in our interactions with strangers, and God trusts that *we* will take care of *them*.

So we can’t let our *fear* keep us from welcoming strangers. Imagine if Abraham had not welcomed these three strangers. *We* would not be here, because that interaction was used to further the promise of God to give Abraham and Sarah a child that allowed the family line to continue, eventually culminating in the birth of Christ.

Imagine if Mary and Martha had not welcomed Christ. Because in all four gospels, the very first person that the resurrected Christ appeared to was Mary. She went back and told the others. But if she had said, “I’m sorry, I don’t know you. You can’t come into my house,” she might have missed out on the good news of the risen Lord.

Imagine if no one in that church in California had welcomed Susanne. *She* might have missed out on the good news of the risen Lord, and *we* would have missed out on a wise and discerning

Elder, and compassionate and caring Deacon, and a warm, loving friend. We would have missed out on wonderful meals and handmade cards and line dancing classes in the parking lot. Our church has been *blessed* because someone welcomed a stranger. We have *all*, at some point, been a *stranger* that someone here *welcomed*.

Now, we have to be careful that we don't hear this as, "*If I welcome the stranger, then I will be blessed.*" "*If our church shows hospitality, then our church will grow.*" It's easy to read Abraham's story as saying, "Abraham welcomed these strangers, and because of that, God blessed him with a child." But the child had *already been promised* to Abraham. This encounter is just a *reminder* of the promise that God has already made to him. Abraham doesn't find favor with God because he shows hospitality. He shows hospitality because he has already found favor with God. The first thing he says to these strangers is, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant." But they *haven't* passed him by. They have *stopped*. He has *already* found favor with the Lord.

Hospitality is not *transactional*. It is not a means to an end, like if we *do* this, then we will be *blessed*. We do it because we have *already* been blessed. We welcome the stranger because *we* were strangers, and we have been welcomed by God. We receive *others* because *we* have been received by *Christ*. Theologian Miroslav Volf writes, "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens *to* us must be done *by* us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others and invite them in – even our enemies."¹ It is about the church being a place – a *people* – of welcome that reflects the welcome we have received from Christ and sharing the welcoming

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 129.

embrace of God with everyone we meet, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.