

Practicing Hospitality
Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67
Sunday, July 5, 2020

For the next couple of months, the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each week) has us following the stories of Abraham’s descendants (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) from the book of Genesis. A lot of biblical scholars think that these stories existed orally for centuries before they were written down – they were just told from one generation to the next – and that they were finally written down around the 700s BC when the people of Israel were in exile.

We’ve been talking a lot about exile lately, this experience of being *displaced*; how *Israel* experienced it, how the early *church* experienced it, and how *we* experience it. So there was something about this experience of being displaced and the uncertainty, anxiety, and fear that came with it that made the people of Israel say, “We need to write these stories down, so they aren’t forgotten and lost forever.” The thinking is that the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (along with a whole lot of *other* Old Testament books) were formally written down during this time of exile. And the *experience* of exile – of being *displaced* – shaped how these stories were written. They wrote the stories of their origins through the lens of what they were experiencing in exile *because*, they thought, *those* experiences (or Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) can teach us something about how to be faithful in *this* experience.

In that same way, *we* are going to be spending the next couple of months that we are physically apart looking at these origin stories to see what they can teach us about how to be faithful in *our* present experience of exile. And remember, this isn’t just about “not being in the building.” We talked the other week about the ways in which we experience exile. We *are* displaced from our

church building, but more importantly, we are displaced from *one another*. And there is a larger sense in which we experience this displacement socially. We look at the violence and injustice and political and racial discord that is so prevalent right now, and those things don't match up with the love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and justice that we are called to as followers of Christ. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God living in the kingdom of this world, and so there is a sense in which we are not *at home*. We are *displaced*. So what can *those* stories teach us about how to be the faithful people of God in *this* experience of displacement?

But I want to *start* by telling you about something that *I* have been doing during these past three months of displacement. As many of you know, I have been working on a doctorate for the past two and a half years. I am about to start working on my thesis project now, but there was one more class I had to take first. It was an independent study that I designed with a professor, and I could do all of the reading and writing from here. So I didn't have to go back to the seminary in Pittsburgh. I would have meetings with my professor online, and then I would do all the work on my own. It was the *perfect* class to have during a pandemic!

The class was a study on individualism in America and in the church – the ways in which it has been instilled in us over the course of centuries that we are autonomous, independent, self-sufficient beings, and we have come to understand ourselves as existing *apart* from one another. And we looked at the ways that this separation from one another has been exacerbated by the racial, political, and religious polarization that we have experienced over the past 50-60 years. That was the course in a nutshell: how did we become individualized and polarized, and how can we come back together? (This *does* have something to do with the story of Isaac and Rebekah, so just hang in there with me for a moment.)

In my final paper for the course, I focused specifically on how we can overcome this tendency to individualization and polarization and rebuild community. What I said was that it takes being intentional about being in relationship with (knowing and listening to the stories of) people who are different from me. Different racially, different politically, people of different nationalities and religions. Our *tendency* is to form relationships with people who are mostly like *us*, racially, politically, and religiously. But there is a ton of research showing that people who are in relationship with people who are not like them in significant ways, those people have lower levels of polarization than people who only associate with those who are like them.

If someone who is white can sit down and listen to and get to know someone who is black, if someone who is a staunch liberal or conservative and sit down and listen to and get to know someone on the total opposite end of the political spectrum, if we can hear the stories about the experiences that have shaped their lives and made them the people they are, then we can come to *understand* them, have *empathy* for them, and maybe even *love* them, in spite of our differences. But to *do* that – to have that space where we can sit down with each other and share our stories – takes being intentional about practicing *hospitality*.

We hear that word *hospitality*, and a lot of times we think of it as, “I like to entertain.” That I practice hospitality when I invite people over, welcome them into my home, feed them, and entertain them. That’s hospitality. And that’s definitely one *expression* of it. But hospitality is much bigger than entertaining. Hospitality is about making room in my life for the *other*. For the *stranger* or the person who is *different* from me. It’s about opening up my *life*, my *home*, my *church*, my *time*, my *resources*, creating space in my life for the *other*. A space in which they feel safe and welcome and valued and seen and heard and loved, *as* they are, for *who* they are. Hospitality is not just about *me* inviting *you* into *my* space. It is about creating a *shared* space in

which we can both relate to one another on *common ground*. And it's not just about *me* welcoming *you* so that *you* are transformed. It's about *mutual* transformation; me opening myself up to being transformed in my encounter with you, and you opening yourself up to being transformed in your encounter with me.

We see this kind of hospitality at work in the story of Isaac and Rebekah. Actually, Isaac plays a very small role in this; he only comes in at the end. It's more about the hospitality between Rebekah and Abraham's servant. The lectionary is very selective about the verses that we read in this story, because it's a *long* story, and they're trying to hit the main points. But what we miss at the beginning of this chapter is that Abraham sends his servant out to find a wife for his son Isaac. This is important. Because God has promised Abraham that he will be the father of *nations*, and for that to happen, his heir Isaac needs to keep the family line going.

So there's a lot hanging on this. This servant has a really important job. And he says to Abraham, "What if the woman I find is not willing to come back here with me?" You kind of expect Abraham to say, "Do whatever it takes," but instead he says, "If she is not willing to come back with you, then you are free from your oath to me." That's going to be important later. But the servant goes to the foreign land where Abraham tells him to go, and he stops at a well. The well was the place where all the women of the town would come to draw water for their families. So he could sit at the well and see all the women of the town. And he prays to God and says, "Let the one to whom I say, 'Please offer your jar that I may have a drink,' and she *gives* me a drink and offers to water my camels, let *that* be the one you have appointed for Isaac.

Rebekah shows up, and that's exactly what happens. She gives him a drink and waters his camels. The servant asks her whose daughter she is, and she is the daughter of the man he was

supposed to go to. She brings the servant back to her home, they welcome him in, give him a place to stay for the night, and he tells them all the story of what happened, which is where our reading picks up. They opened up their lives to this stranger, opened up their home to him, welcomed him, cared for him, shared their resources with him, and they listened to his story. They practiced hospitality with him, and they experienced mutual transformation because they all saw how God was at work in this.

When the servant asks if they will allow their daughter to go back with him to Isaac, normally they would have worked out some deal – “You give us this much money or livestock, and we’ll give you our daughter.” – but instead Rebekah’s father says, “The thing comes from the Lord. We will ask Rebekah.” And they ask her if she wants to go with him back to Isaac. Remember how earlier in the story, the servant asked Abraham, “What if she won’t come back with me,” and Abraham lets him off the hook if that happens? So the servant is under *no pressure to make* her come back. And Rebekah is under no pressure to do so. They let her choose, which is something that did not happen in that time and culture. Your father said, “You’re going to go with him,” and you went with him. There is no coercion here, no force. Rebekah has agency in this to make her own decision. Just as Rebekah and her family have practiced hospitality with this servant, now they are practicing hospitality with *her*. They are opening up space for her to express what she wants. And she chooses to go with him.

God’s promise is fulfilled and a new family is formed *because they practice hospitality with one another*. And they are *able* to practice hospitality *because they trust that God is in this*.

So for the people of Israel who are writing this story down while exiled in a foreign land, they hear this story of Abraham’s servant traveling to a foreign land, trusting that God is guiding him,

and hospitality being practiced, and they hear something about *their own* situation. “If God could be in *that* situation in a foreign land, maybe God could be in *this* situation. Maybe we can trust that God is guiding *us*. And maybe hospitality can be practiced *here*. Even in this experience of exile, we can trust God and act in love toward the stranger.”

What does that look like for *us* in *our* experience of displacement? I’ve been thinking about this all week, and this is really a hard one. Because how do we practice hospitality in a time when most of us really aren’t welcoming people into our homes? But remember, hospitality isn’t just about welcoming people into “our” space. It’s about opening our lives up to this other person, creating a shared space in which they feel safe and welcome and valued and loved. And what I kept coming back to all week as I was thinking about this, the most practical, concrete way that we can do this right now, in our current situation, is by wearing a mask.

That seems like a strange, “non-spiritual” way to practice hospitality, but think about it. In a time when so many people are *anxious* and *uncertain* and *afraid* about being in public, this simple gesture shows the people around us that their life is just as important to us as our own. I know that when *I* am out somewhere and I see people not wearing masks, I don’t feel comfortable or safe there. It makes me worry about my own health and the health of my family. But to see other people wearing masks in a shared space makes me feel a little more safe and welcome and comfortable and valued by them. So maybe in this time of distancing and quarantine, the best way that we can show hospitality to others is by wearing a mask. Viewing this minor inconvenience as a *spiritual practice*. It is a gesture that actively creates space in my life for the other; that it’s not just about *me*, it’s about *us*. And in the midst of a global pandemic, that is an act of love for our neighbor.

In time, we will be able to find *other* ways to practice hospitality. But like the hospitality practiced by the servant and Rebekah and her family, this is what will allow the story to keep going. So like them, we trust that God is in this – *even this* – and we show our love for God by making room for the other, that we might *all* be transformed by God’s grace. Amen.