

Extravagant Welcome
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Genesis 18: 1-8
Mark 3: 31-35
Luke 14: 15-24

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Bedouin tribes in the Middle East still hold to ancient customs where traveling strangers are invited out of the desert to share a tent. There, they are treated as honored guests by the host. They are offered water for washing, a little refreshment, and courtesy. So strong is this sense of duty to the stranger, that even one's mortal enemy must be treated this way so long as he is within the tent of the host. Perhaps then, conversation could lead to a peaceful resolution of conflict.

It was no different in the time of Abraham. The three men who appear to Abraham as he sits by the door of his tent in the heat of the day are actually angels, divine messengers. They represent God disguised. The reader of these verses from Genesis realizes this, but Abraham is not aware of the divine character of these visitors. Still, he runs from the tent door to meet them and treats the three wayfarers as though they were sent by God. He begs them to accept his hospitality, placing them under the cool shade of the oak, bringing water to wash their feet. His initial offering of a morsel of bread turns into a feast of a calf, cakes made from three measures of fine meal, curds, and milk.

Scripture emphasizes that strangers are to be welcomed, and that there is an element of mystery in even the most casual encounters because the stranger we meet may have been sent by God. But, now, and especially after September 11th, we live in a culture where we are taught to avoid or even fear strangers... they are not familiar and therefore might even be dangerous. We are more likely to take advantage of a stranger than to offer hospitality.

The story goes that there was a Kansas merchant who owned a general store in a rural area. He was famous for offering a verse of scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. A group of local regulars enjoyed sitting around the old potbelly stove every morning, and they looked forward to these exchanges because some of the purchases or customers would challenge the store owner's biblical memory.

Now one wintry day, a Texan stopped in, wanting to buy a blanket for his horse. The old-timers sitting around the stove looked up with interest because they knew that the store stocked two types of blankets. One sold for \$60, and the expensive one cost \$90. The store owner first showed the Texan the cheaper blanket. "No, that's not good enough", he sniffed. "I need something much better for my horse." The owner then spread out an example of the second type which sold for \$90. Still, the Texan was not satisfied. "That's not good enough either!" he complained. "Don't you understand? Nothing is too good for my horse! Show me your most expensive blanket!"

The store became very quiet at the owner reached under the counter to the \$90 stock of blankets, pulled out a plaid one, and spread it on the counter with great finesse. "This is the finest, and the only one I have. Colorfast, 100% wool, with a very tight weave. It sells for \$250." The Texan was delighted. "Now you're talking!" he said. "I'll take it!" He left with the blanket and a big grin on his face.

The locals around the wood stove looked expectantly at the store owner. What biblical text would he recite for this unusual purchase? With a poker face, the merchant opened his cash drawer and carefully counted the money as he placed it inside. "Matthew 25, verse 35- altered version: 'He was a stranger, and I took him in.'"

Now, although we can say that the Texan certainly asked for this kind of treatment, the story reminds us that many strangers often receive a very reduced measure of hospitality, if not outright hostility, at the hands of those who are in the position to be good hosts. The English word for stranger comes from the Latin "extraneus" meaning "outside or without". The Hebrew word for stranger is the root of the word for "border". Thus, there are only strangers because we have created borders. Those who live outside those borders often appear unfamiliar, or even frightening.

We have created many borders. Some are geographical or political. Some are simply those economic, racial, or cultural borders which make it difficult for one group of people to feel welcomed by another. Some invisible borders are even present in churches. But, it is in crossing borders and encountering strangers that we find the presence of God. We remember that the Bible reminds us that one should treat a stranger with hospitality because in doing so we may glimpse the face of God. God is the ultimate host. We are all "Wayfarin' Strangers", sojourners on this earth which we have been given. And just as God has treated us graciously, we in return are to show kindness and offer an extravagant welcome to those who are strangers in our midst.

But all too often, instead of acting like Abraham, who rushes out of his tent to meet weary travelers, we are more like the villagers in the story of "Stone Soup" who must be tricked into sharing their resources. You remember the story... a ragged soldier arrives in a village where no one wishes to give him a meal. With the wary townspeople peeking out behind their closed doors, he pretends to make a pot of soup with water and a stone. He is able to convince the curious villagers that the soup would be so much better with a morsel of vegetable here, or a bone there, or perhaps a few spices. And of course, by the end of the tale, the soup is delicious. Many times, we, too, prefer to hide behind the closed doors of our cultural restraints, our familiar practices, our nervousness around people who are not like us.

Some of us are not naturally prone to hospitality. It doesn't come easy for us. We must be taught how to do it well, and we must teach our children to do likewise. Others of us seem to have a more natural inclination toward hospitality. It seems to be part of our genetic make-up.

Kathleen Norris has a wonderful collection of essays called "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith." In one chapter, Norris describes her stay in a Benedictine monastery as a lesson in how to embody hospitality. For the monks and nuns who live there, welcoming outsiders to the monastery to refresh themselves with food and worship becomes as natural as breathing. One young nun told Norris of an older woman in the monastery rest home, a nun with Alzheimer's who insisted every day that her wheelchair be placed at the entrance so that she could greet everyone who came in. The younger nun explained: "She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to, but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life."

Think about a time in your life when you have been surprised by a gracious welcome in an unexpected place. I remember a hot day in Mexico, when my husband and I and our two young children were living in the state of Puebla while working for Habitat for Humanity. We had driven with a Mexican friend by jeep for two hours over dusty rutted roads to a very poor village. They were not expecting us. We spent some time talking about the Habitat program with the village council members, and by then, it was well into the afternoon and time for the midday meal. A widowed woman and her daughter invited us to share a meal with them in her single-room bamboo hut. She placed us in the only two chairs she had at her rickety table and then brought us boiled chicken from the iron cooking pot on the fire. She would not sit herself, but insisted on bringing rice and tortillas and more chicken for us to enjoy. Finally, she cut up a papaya and set it before us with a satisfied smile. Never had a papaya tasted so cool and sweet! My thanks were sincere, her hospitality was genuine, and we were both dignified and enriched by this exchange.

Extravagant welcome doesn't require an ostentatious display of wealth. It can be simple and lovely. Sometimes the poor do it better than anyone else. Hospitality recognizes that we are all family, in spite of our differences. It means drawing the circle of kinship wider and larger. This is what Jesus was trying to say when he was teaching in front of a crowd and received a message that his mother and brothers wanted him. Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around at those sitting in a circle about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:34-35)

We here at Elon Community Church began as a community of strangers to one another. Some of us have been here for a long time. Others of us are fairly new. But over time, we have come to know one another. Powerful friendships have blossomed. Our boundaries have begun to blur. What was unfamiliar has become beloved.

But I hope that as we continue to get to know each other, we will also continue to make friends of the new strangers that walk through these doors. May we be intentional about practicing the craft of hospitality. It should not become someone else's job. Sometimes churches are guilty of institutionalizing hospitality. Members make financial contributions which help church programs or charitable projects, but that is the extent of their outreach to those who are strangers. It falls short of true hospitality in which we personally touch someone else. By depriving ourselves of the grace of extending a personal welcome to another human being, we deny ourselves the gift of getting to know a person who wears the face of Christ.

By leaving hospitality to someone else, we cut ourselves off from connecting with others. In the words of the Kalahari Bushmen, we can become "far-hearted." My hope is that we will continue to strive to make this church a place where hearts become close, and that we will do this because each one of us reaches out to those we do not yet know.

Here at Elon, we are excited about the impending construction of a beautiful new educational building. That is indeed something to celebrate. However, we should take care not to let the building take priority over people. Let's make sure that this wonderful building offers extravagant welcome, not just to the folks who are already members here, folks who are familiar, but also to people in the community who are desperately in need of kindness, a morsel of bread, and a place where they are welcomed, rather than judged.

It is an honor to be a host to another person. We must recapture the sacred nature of hospitality, the give and take that is grace. For in the giving and receiving, surprising things can, and do occur. God breaks into the ordinary unexpectedly, and host and guest are changed in some mysterious way that can only be called amazing grace.

One of my favorite movies depicts the mysterious, transforming power of true hospitality. "Babette's Feast" is a movie by a Danish filmmaker based on a story by Isak Denison. It is a wonderful tale of two spinster sisters living in a village on the rugged coast of Denmark. Their father, now dead for many years, was the founder of a small Protestant sect, which had now dwindled to only eleven elderly members. Aside from the gentle sisters, they had all become sour-faced, pious people, full of self-righteousness and suspicious of each other.

Enter Babette, a mysterious middle-aged refugee from France, who is sent to the sisters by an old friend. She arrives exhausted, in a drenching rain, entreating the hospitality of the two good women, and accompanied by a letter of recommendation from the friend which says, "Babette can cook".

This proves to be quite a delightful understatement. Babette stays fourteen years with the sisters, cleaning and cooking delicious soups which they distribute to the elderly in the village. Then, Babette discovers

that a lottery ticket which a friend in France had renewed for her every year has won her ten thousand francs. The two sisters congratulate her on her good fortune, but sorrowfully believe that she will now leave them.

What Babette does next makes the movie into a modern-day parable about hospitality. She asks the two sisters for the first favor she has ever requested of them, that she be allowed to prepare the meal in honor of the 100th anniversary of the birth of their father, and that she be allowed to pay for it with her own money.

The sisters reluctantly agree, and Babette proceeds to spend her entire winnings on a feast, the likes of which had never been seen before.

The eleven remaining members of the church are present at the feast, as is the former suitor of one of the sisters, General Lowenheim, who has come to visit his elderly aunt. While the wind howls outside, they are treated to an incredible and sumptuous dinner of turtle soup, caviar and quail, pastries, champagne and rare wine. Babette reveals that she was once chef at the world-renowned Café Anglais in Paris, and she has spent all ten thousand francs on an act which allowed her a final flourish of her artistry, artistry which in a sense is wasted on the guests who had no idea of the quality of food they were served.

Yet it was not wasted... for an amazing thing happened. This remarkable meal had transformed the twelve guests. It created a space where they could come together and see each other as they had not in years. Their bickering ceased, old feuds were settled, friendship and love rekindled. Grace had occurred.

One might think this a wasteful extravagance, that Babette should have been more practical. But Jesus blesses the extravagant gesture. When Judas reprimanded the woman who poured a costly bottle of perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, Jesus rebuked Judas and thanked the woman for her extravagant welcome to him.

The Lakota Sioux tribe also practice a version of Babette's feast. They have a custom called "the giveaway" in which one family entertains others with feasting and giving away valued possessions. Through this practice, a person learns that things are made to be given, not hoarded. It is a tradition which strengthens the community. Those who are the givers eventually become those who receive gifts from others. The roles of guest and host constantly shift back and forth. Children learn that ownership of possessions is temporary. One loves people more than the goods that are given away.

The extravagant welcome is one where both givers and receivers are surprised by grace. Just so, Abraham found that the result of his hospitality was to hear the amazing announcement that he would have a son. Just so, I discovered that a simple meal in a dirt-floored hut in Mexico enriched my life and gave dignity to another woman.

Just so, the Lakota Sioux recognize that strong relationships and warm fellowship happen when sacrificial giving occurs. There is another Lakota phrase used as a prayer. Mitakuye Oyasin. It literally means, "All my relatives- I am related to you."

This is what Jesus tells us when he reminds us that we are all his mother, brothers and sisters. It is what Jesus teaches us in the parable about God's great feast. Everyone has a place at the table, even those who wouldn't normally be considered appropriate guests.

May we keep practicing the art of hospitality, continuing to learn how to be gracious hosts and respectful guests. May we widen our circle of kinship, reaching out to those who are not like us, so that we do not become "far-hearted." We are all family, and Jesus is our brother. In the words of the Lakota, "You are all my relatives. I am related to you!" AMEN.