

## **“Connect with One Another – Connect with God”**

**Genesis 18: 1–15**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

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### **Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Jim Morrison put it best in his classic song:

*People are strange, when you're a stranger,  
faces look ugly, when you're alone,  
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted,  
streets are uneven, when you are down.  
When you're strange, faces come out of the rain.  
When you're strange, no one remembers your name.  
When you're strange.*

We live in a world filled with fear.

Fear of the stranger.

Things get strange when you're a stranger.

We live in a culture of that fears the stranger.

What does the Bible have to say about this? One of the most consistent messages in the Bible is: Do not be afraid. Trust in the Lord.

In conjunction with this, there is a consistent message about hospitality to the stranger. By consistent, I mean, hospitality is a theme that is absolutely clear in: Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Ruth, Job, Isaiah, Nehemiah, 2 Kings, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, Peter, Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews.

But if there is one story that sets the trajectory for the rest of the Bible, it is that story of Abraham and Sarah. The founding figures of Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Abraham and Sarah are 2 people more than well into their retirement years, He is in his 90s! People who always longed for a child, but never had one. So even though they are currently living in a tent, they see 3 traveling strangers about to pass on by. But Abraham runs out to greet them.

Abraham says, “Hey, don’t walk on by. Let me get you a little something to drink and a morsel of bread: A cup of coffee and a donut. I’ll brew up a fresh pot. Just relax a few minutes.”

Abraham tells his servant to go kill the fatted calf, and break out the fine china.

When Abraham comes back, he serves up a full on banquet: filet mignon, a Bordeaux fit for a king. And on a hot sweltering summer day, he gives them pudding.

The whole time the strangers are feasting, Abraham does not even sit down: he stands by, like the maître de of the finest restaurant. Abraham and Sarah are the quintessential perfect hosts.

But then wait, the guests, the strangers, start to speak. And the text changes: it no longer says three men. It says, "The Lord."

Is that a bit confusing? Good! It's supposed to be! It is supposed to make us ask: Who exactly is the stranger? We thought it was three strangers. It turns out to be the Lord.

In the Biblical Hebrew, the verb that means "to receive someone as a guest" is the same verb that means, "Surprise!" Abraham and Sarah receive the surprise of their life!

In Biblical Greek, the word for Stranger is the noun *xenos*. The word for Host is also the word, *xenos*. The word for Guest is also, *xenos*.

So the potential situation could be that the *xenos* welcomes the *xenos* as their *xenos*.

Is that a bit confusing? Good! It is supposed to be! It lifts up the question to the faithful: In a social situation, are you the host? Or are you the guest? And who, exactly, is the stranger?

The intention is that this whole relationship is fluid. To encounter a stranger, and to treat them with outstanding hospitality is to open ourselves up to the possibility of encountering the Divine Presence. God.

Encountering God, The Bible says, "Sarah laughed." And she tried to hide it. But God says, "No, I heard you laugh." 90 year old Sarah laughed because she imagined the looks on the faces of the people at the geriatric Medicare office when they get the bill from the delivery room!

Sarah laughs for joy. For Abraham and Sarah, the Stranger imparts to them a gift that exponentially outweighs the gift Abraham and Sarah had given. Because the Stranger had given them their heart's desire. A future.

The world's greatest hosts end up receiving the world's greatest gift. The host becomes the guest, the guest becomes the host. My friend Ted calls this the Biblical guest-host flip-flop.

Delight in the mysterious reversals and gains for all parties. Fueled by the expectation that God will play a role in every transaction of hospitality. Welcoming the stranger.

This is not the fear mongering culture's story of stranger/danger. It is the Biblical story of partnership with strangers. New Testament hospitality has to do with the establishing of committed relationships between guest and hosts in which unexpected levels of mutual welcoming occur.

The good news is, everyone can become a stranger! Strange in the best sense. Bible scholar John Koenig writes about Biblical hospitality as opening ourselves up to the goal of a world of greater inclusiveness.

“... partnership with strangers... suggests forming alliances with outsiders, foreigners, enemies, and so forth, in the conviction that God’s redeeming work always discloses itself along these frontiers...”

Surprise! Because we don’t have to be afraid anymore. Partnership with strangers signifies a joining of co-believers, friends and so on, in the expectation that new forms of reciprocity will take place among them.

These in turn lead them to perceive people in a different light, perhaps as mediators of God’s presence and therefore “strange” in the best sense.

Hospitality is the catalyst. Hospitality is the fertile ground in which connections are made. Friendships are born. Partnerships are formed. A reaching-out to humanity comes about through God’s providence.

Essentially, hospitality is a key element of Jesus’ central message: God’s love as it takes place in the church and in the kingdom of God.

So what does hospitality mean for us? First of all, as I’ve said before, I visit churches when I’m on vacation. Worship every week is how I practice honoring God. I love these experiences.

One church welcomed me at the entry way to the church with an egg taco and a chocolate donut. Did I think, “Whoa, that’s a lot of calories, a lot of cholesterol?” No! Who was I to turn down their version fatted calf? They were great hosts! People of faith communicate through food. I felt like I belonged.

Another church I visited a church in Texas this summer. They stood up and greeted each other during the service. Can you believe it?! These were Presbyterians! God’s frozen chosen! Two of them walked back four pews to greet me, a stranger. I thought I’d calm them down – I told them I was not from Texas. In fact I was from Minnesota. I thought that would be the end of it. But after worship, one of them came to greet me, the other one found two members in the congregation who moved there from Minnesota and who sprinted across the entryway to greet me. I did not feel like a stranger any longer. I felt a true sense of welcome. Acceptance. Belonging.

I told you those stories before. Now, how are you going to be more welcoming than those other Presbyterians? You may think, “No, we can’t do that. We’re Norwegians.” But the Bible says: We need to out-do one another in love. We need to outdo one another in connecting with people. Because we live in this world that is extraordinarily afraid. Fear turns to isolation, and even violence.

The only way we are going to change it -- is to be extraordinarily welcoming. Church is the place we practice. You are the hosts at this party. You are Abraham and Sarah. It's up to you to be extraordinarily welcoming to everyone who walks through the doors. Go out of your way. Find a way: make connections.

Secondly, I would like to encourage you to invite someone to church. Make this a place of Invitation. It is a gift to invite someone to church.

It was probably 25 or 30 years ago, I was in Colorado. I had just taken a peaceful walk around a peaceful lake, although I was not feeling peaceful at all. Almost no one else was there. I ended up on a dock, looking at the peaceful water.

All of a sudden, I was aware here was this middle-aged African American couple, standing nearby taking a selfie by the lake. I am very proud of my ability to press a button on a camera. I wanted to bless them with this gift. I said, "Would you like me to take your picture?" They said yes.

Then they started to talk with me. The husband and I discovered we were both pastors. He asked how it was going. I had to tell him. It was going bad. Really bad. Horrible. I was in a real dark night of the soul. And we stood on the dock and talked. It was probably for not more than 10 minutes. But like no one else, he understood my problem exactly. And he shared with me a scripture verse I never heard before. It was exactly what I needed to find my way out of the darkness, into the light.

Now it's all these years later. I doubt he remembered me two days later. But I've never forgotten the gift he gave me. It's still blessing me. That day, I thought I was playing host, offering to take their picture. I ended up being the guest, who was given a feast.

What is it Hebrews says: "Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware." I would add, sometimes you even get to take their picture.

Faith is a gift. This church is a gift. It helps to make sense of life's challenges. It connects people to God. It connects people to each other. It is a gift, but we have to gift the gift.

I invite you to invite someone to church. Next week.

At the door, there are copies of our newsletter, the Anchor. It's in plastic bags. Hand it to someone and invite them to join you here next week. Or, if that is too much for you, go to someone's house, hang it on their door-handle and run away. I don't care how you do it, but find a way to invite them to this marvelous House of Hope community. Because what they experience here may be the light that overcomes their gloom. It may be the gift that makes all the difference.

This fall, we are talking about making connections. Making connections with God. And making connections with each other. Because the world only changes when we do practical things to make it change. It's built on relationships.

Remember our Biblical call is to welcome the stranger. And then be open to the surprise. In welcoming the stranger, sometimes you will entertain angels, unaware.

Sources:

John Koenig. *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*. Fortress Press.