

Who do we think we are, anyway? – Welcome

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November 17th, 2013

Genesis 18:1-8

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. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

I remember staring at a menu without a clue what I might be about to order. Coming to the end of a summer study-abroad in France, my language and comprehension had grown, but I was tired. I had been living with a French couple who were instructed to always, no matter what, only speak to me in French. My French lessons back in the U.S. had covered a certain dialect of the language and technically I was considered “intermediate,” but the equivalent classes in France were far over my head. The past four weeks had been wonderful and beautiful, but I couldn’t count how many times I’d been lost, confused, unsure, and even embarrassed by my inadequate understanding of the language and culture.

A friend and I had just returned from a train ride to a nearby town where we had been completely lost and unable to find someone to speak enough English to help us find the right train home. It was long past dinnertime and we were starving. I found myself longing for a McDonalds or a Subway – a familiar place where I could order anything from the menu and know it’d be okay. But here I was, in the last café still open in town, staring at a menu with words that my exhausted brain could not comprehend. The waiter must have known I was a traveler before I even opened my mouth. “You look tired,” he said in the first English I’d heard in

weeks. “Can I help you choose something to eat?” I just about fell out of my chair in gratitude. It wouldn’t have even mattered if the waiter brought me liver and onions at that point – I was just so grateful for his hospitality and welcome.

Although travel can still be exhausting, especially when you find yourself running a half-marathon across the Chicago airport, toting a pair of toddlers through security lines, or sitting dead-locked in traffic on the interstate, in many ways we have it pretty good. Cell phones, rest stops, Holiday Inn and even the beloved Golden Arches are all fairly recent amenities that we take for granted. But it hasn’t always been this way. Some of you here might even remember a time when you had to use a (gasp!) *paper map* in order to find your way from place to place.

Most likely, the travelers in our scripture passage this morning didn’t have a paper map with rest areas and inn’s highlighted in yellow. As author Diana Butler Bass points out, “Through most of history...travel has been hard. Being a traveler meant putting oneself at risk, exposing oneself to the perils of unknown lands. The early Christians knew this, and developed their language of pilgrimage and journey against this dangerous landscape. Those same early Christians— eventually followed by medieval monastic communities—also developed their practices of hospitality as a way of caring for God’s wayfarers.” If a stranger came knocking at your door today, asking for food and a place to sleep, I imagine you’d look at him strangely and point to the nearest hotel. But back then, if someone came knocking at your door, it was expected and a social requirement really, that you’d provide him with something to eat and a place to rest.

So when Abraham looked up from his resting place just outside his home and saw three strangers standing nearby, it wouldn’t have been unexpected for him to get up quickly to greet them. Now, the author of Genesis has the benefit of hindsight and knows that one of these three men is the Lord – and so we, as the readers hear that bit of info right away – but Abraham doesn’t recognize God and only sees three travelers in need of a place to rest and some food to eat. Abraham goes to them and bows down in respect, offering water to wash their feet and some bread. Abraham refers to himself as the travelers’ servant, because he is a faithful Jewish man and this kind of hospitality is very important to Jewish and Christian faith.

Scripture tells us that Abraham goes into his tent to find his wife, Sarah, where he asks her to make some bread. Meanwhile, Abraham asks his servant to prepare a calf so that they might also have some meat for their meal. *This* act, of preparing and serving meat, is where we begin to see the gracious extent of Abraham's hospitality. For, while it would have been expected that he offer bread and water to the strangers, the gift of meat would have been above and beyond.

We witness Abraham giving of himself – by running, honoring, inviting, refreshing, preparing and serving the best that he has, remaining nearby and attentive to these strangers taking up his time and eating his food. If this were to happen today, it'd be like a homeless man asking a CEO on his way to a busy day at the office whether he'd be willing to spare a dollar for a hamburger – and the CEO not just handing the man a dollar and running off to his responsibilities, but walking with the man into a restaurant, sitting down at the corner booth, ordering two hamburgers to share while they talk about life and the Browns latest football game, and then asking the man whether he'd like to order another meal “to go.” An unexpected gift of both time and welcome.

Hospitality, the gift of welcome, is perhaps one of the most prominent themes of all our scripture—second only to love. They go hand in hand, really, as we hear Jesus say in Matthew 22:39 that the greatest of God's commandments is to love God and the second greatest is to love your neighbor as yourself, then just a few chapters later, in Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus warns that the way we love others – how we welcome them—is one of the ways by which we are judged. He says, “the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you...for 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...Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?...and the king will answer them, ‘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.’”

It's as if Jesus is hidden in all of the people we might be least likely to think of as God's chosen one – the man with no shoes desperately needing a haircut and a job; the child with ADHD who can't stop fidgeting, talking loudly and running around the restaurant when you're trying to have a nice dinner; the veteran just returning from Afghanistan, needing a place to live and time to get used to a

“normal” way of life again; the immigrant family next door always asking for help; It’s as if Jesus is inviting us to take a risk and love all the strangest people in the boldest of ways...

Because, hey, you never know when it might just be *Jesus’* scraggly beard you’re grossed out by, or *God’s* tired brown eyes asking you for yet another favor, maybe an *angel’s* quiet sigh in the corner sitting completely ignored and forgotten.

The wisdom of Hebrews 13 says, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” It would seem that Abraham is not the only one who has served angels or even God, without even knowing it. Chances are pretty good we’ve all done the same...I just hope it was the time I said ‘thank you’ to the man bagging my groceries and *not* the time my sour attitude snapped at nurse about how long I’d been waiting to see the doctor.

Over and over again through scripture and my grandma, God has reminded me that hospitality is not an option. Welcoming both friends and strangers into my life is not a choice, but a charge. Welcome is what we do because it is *who we are* – people already welcomed by God, who follow a savior who calls us to welcome the stranger. Through hospitality, we imitate God’s welcome.

As part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), within the greater whole of Christianity, we take welcome and hospitality even more personally – for welcoming people into God’s presence at the communion table is part of our very identity. “*We are disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.*” (Do you have this identity statement memorized yet? I’ve certainly said it more in the past 3 weeks than ever in my lifetime!) Today is the third in a worship series on this identity statement. We have already considered how being a “movement” means we’re moving forward, that we’re moving toward “wholeness,” for unity and peace among all of God’s creation, and today we’re looking more deeply at the word... “welcome.” Welcome is the only word, other than Christ’s name, that appears twice in our identity statement. That’s how important it is to who we are. Welcome is also the only word that moves us away from an understanding of who we *are* to what we *do*.

If you only have 3 seconds in an elevator to explain to someone what makes our church different from the other Protestant church down the street – tell them that we are a church who *welcomes* everyone to the communion table every week. If you haven't heard me say the entire identity statement so much you know it by heart, at least remember this – (and repeat after me...) we welcome everyone to the communion table every week. Now, turn to your neighbor and say it!

Welcome is part of who we are because it's what we do – week after week after week. When Stone and Campbell started this movement on the American frontier over 200 years ago, one of the reasons they left their prior churches to start this new thing is because they believed there should never be any human-made obstacles placed between God's people and the communion table. They didn't think it should matter whether you had sinned, how much money you gave, how long it had been since you last came to worship, how strong your faith or however many doubts...God's grace is sufficient and covers us all. Through Jesus Christ, God has opened this table to each and every one of us – despite ourselves—and so it is our responsibility and our joy to share this kind of radical grace and welcome with others. It is not our job to judge anyone's worthiness, including our own, for that is God's job. And truth be told, I feel relieved knowing it's not my job to judge others, and even better knowing God is the one waiting at the table to judge us all worthy.

In this day and age we are all travelers on a journey. We may have more than enough electronic gadgets to guide us on a road trip from here to Texas, but there's no downloadable app to get us a straight shot to God. Although the malls blaring Christmas music are already trying to tell us otherwise, you can't buy love and grace for \$2.99.

In fact, although God's grace is free, it's also costly; and following Jesus' way of extending welcome to strangers is risky. I think that's why so few people can actually do it. I'm not talking about the risk of picking up a hitch-hiker –that's not risk, that's stupidity in today's landscape. I'm talking about the risk of not just giving someone a cup of coffee when they show up in your day unexpectedly, but sitting down and having a real conversation. I'm talking about the vulnerability of welcoming the unknown into your life. Welcome for Christians is more than just setting out a plate of cookies—it's taking the chance that meeting and opening

yourself up to a stranger might actually change something in you for the better. **Welcome is inviting God to open your eyes to the depths of God's love for each and every one of us, despite our differences.** That's why it's so hard and we struggle with it so much. Many times we don't want our eyes opened or we think they're just fine the way they are. We'd rather avoid the challenging, messy parts of the faith journey. I don't know a single person who wouldn't prefer a non-stop flight to their destination over a 5-day car ride with a screaming toddler in a car that keeps breaking down every 500 miles.

But as so many of you have already discovered, there is joy in the journey. A non-stop flight may seem quick and painless, but the 5th car-breakdown might just lead you to an amazing view you might have missed, or appreciation for the waiter who brings you that extra-hot cup of coffee. You might just learn something freeing about yourself, or at the least, you'll have a really great story to tell later on.

What we didn't read in the story about Abraham from this morning is that he did all of this welcoming without even knowing he was in the presence of God. Welcome was just so much a part of who he was, that he opened himself and his home to these strangers without even knowing that he was about to be blessed. But the rest of the story, the part we didn't read, is that right after the three strangers finished eating their meal out under the tree, they gave him the best news of his life: at 99 years old, he would soon be a father for the first time! (Now, if that isn't complicated and messy good news, I don't know what is.)

Welcoming the stranger into our mist isn't the easiest thing to do – it if was, scripture wouldn't have to be so repetitive and Jesus wouldn't have to show us how to do it in so many ways. But it's an important part of our faith journey. Because in welcoming the stranger, by risking something valuable to you in order to provide space for me (the stranger) in your life...

...we *both* might start to understand just how deep God's grace flows.