

“FOOD FOR THOUGHT: FEEDING STRANGERS”

Genesis 18:1-15

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This story puts the Biblical value of “hospitality” on full display. The way Abraham welcomes the three strangers who show up at his tent is the very definition of the word, the story that other stories of hospitality harken back to, the example of ideal hospitality to be emulated.

It’s hard for us to appreciate just how powerful this value was in the ancient near-east – and continues to be in that part and other parts of the world. For us, hospitality generally means something like having a few friends over for a cook-out, or bringing some cookies for coffee-plus. Or we might think of the “hospitality” industry. But before Best Western and Cracker Barrel, before AAA road service, people had to rely on this culture of hospitality, this shared understanding of duty, for food, shelter, and protection whenever they ventured out into the world. It could be a matter of life and death.

Abraham’s story both reflects and reinforces the importance of this value.

There are a couple of things to notice in this practice of hospitality.

First of all, it’s extended to strangers, not just family, friends, and associates. That’s not an afterthought, but the cornerstone of this culture of hospitality. It only works if everyone can feel both the responsibility of hospitality and some confidence as a potential recipient that other people share that same sense of responsibility. But I think it’s more than a social contract. It seems to me that it also rests on a certain respect for others, perhaps a recognition of the image of God in each human being. Maybe that’s why in this and similar stories you get a sense that a household is honored by the presence of a guest.

And second, hospitality is characterized by generosity. The little details in the story describe a lavish and eager hospitality. Abraham unhesitatingly runs to meet these strangers, and welcomes them with the best he has to offer: water to wash their feet, the shade of his tree to rest in, some bread for them to eat. He hurries to get his wife Sarah to make some cakes, runs out to select the best calf from the herd, gets his servant right on to the task of preparing it. There’s a lot of hurrying in this story! And no reluctance, no sense that Abraham might have had other things to do. He is glad to be able to demonstrate hospitality, and eager to please. When everything is ready – and this must have taken some time - he serves the guests meat, and cheese, and milk... and presumably cakes as well. While they eat, he stands close by – trying to be a good host, attentive to his guests’ needs, making sure they know he’s glad to make them welcome.

We see these themes echoed throughout scripture –

The Hebrew Bible includes a number of other stories of men and women who provide generous, even sacrificial, hospitality; they are held up as people of faith, and they generally receive blessings of some kind in return for their graciousness. There are also stories of those who fail at the practice of hospitality; those don't end well.

We see this value reiterated in the gospels: Jesus feeds a crowd, with baskets and baskets left over. He urges anyone giving a dinner to invite, not their friends or those who can repay their hospitality, but the poor and disabled. He helps a family giving a wedding banquet by making sure there is enough wine – lest they fail to meet expectations of hospitality. He talks about welcoming strangers, giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty. He tells a story of a father welcoming home a wayward son, with details – like the “fatted calf” that echo Abraham's hospitality.

We also see the ways hospitality was valued in the early church. Paul and the other missionaries repeatedly expressed gratitude for those who welcomed, fed and sheltered them in their travels. There are several mentions of hospitality in the New Testament letters: Paul writes to the Romans encouraging them to “pursue hospitality with strangers,” and in 1 Peter we read “be hospitable to one another without complaining.”

It seems to me that nearly everything in the Bible that touches on hospitality connects back somehow to Abraham's welcome of the strangers under the oak trees at Mamre. Most of all, perhaps, this well-known verse from the book of Hebrews, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (13:2) This has long been thought a reference to the strangers Sarah and Abraham entertained.

Which makes me wonder: Are we meant to believe that Abraham was really unaware that these strangers were divine messengers? He could hardly have been more effusive in his welcome, even if he did sense who they were. The narrator introduces the story by saying “The Lord appeared to Abraham...” but it's less clear what Abraham perceives, when he looks up to see three men standing nearby.

We certainly don't know what we're supposed to make of these three figures. The narrator of the story seems to go back and forth between presenting them as a group and referring to “the Lord” as the one speaking. Some people say they are angels, and in art they're often portrayed that way. Some suggest that two of them are angels and the other is God. The picture you see on the screen is called “the hospitality of Abraham” but is often (along with many similar pictures) referred to as “the Old Testament Trinity.” This is all kind of puzzling, and just adds to the sense of mystery around these figures. Our tendency is to want it explained more clearly, but we should keep in mind that we are hearing a very ancient story here. Ancient peoples would not have made the firm distinction we'd want to make between God and a messenger of God. For them, it amounts to the same thing. This isn't systematic theology. It's about the presence of the divine, and that presence can be experienced in different ways.

Perhaps Abraham has an inkling that something out of the ordinary is happening – after all, God has spoken to him before now, several times. Perhaps it's just that these strangers seem like

important or powerful people to whom he should show respect. Maybe the story is deliberately ambiguous, to suggest that Abraham would have welcomed any guest as if welcoming God.

At any rate, Abraham (and Sarah) do welcome these mysterious strangers, And it turns out that the strangers have a message for them: that in spite of their advanced age, they will have a son.

Now, this is not *new* news. God has made this promise to Abraham before. So at this point in the story, it's clear that the guests are delivering a word from God. There can be no doubt about it. But there's definitely some doubt about whether that word can be trusted; after all, Abraham and Sarah have waited a long time and now are far too old to become parents. No wonder Sarah laughs. And lest we blame her too much for not having faith, we should note that Abraham also laughed about the same exact thing in an earlier conversation with God. But this time turns out to be different; the next year Sarah does give birth to Isaac, whose name means "laughter" ... and the laughter of skepticism becomes the laughter of joy.

I wonder if we are meant to see the two parts of the story – the hospitality and the promise – as somehow related. I don't mean to suggest a child as a reward for nice hospitality. But is there something about this generous hospitality that signals a faith deeper even than Sarah's and Abraham's doubts? They welcome these strangers as honored guests without knowing exactly who they are or why they are there. They make hospitable space – in their home, in their day, at their table, in their hearts -for them. And it turns out that when you make space for God, surprising things happen. Even if you didn't exactly know it was God you were making space for.

Jesus tells us something similar: he says that anytime we give water to someone thirsty, food to a hungry person, a welcome to a stranger, it's as if we are doing this for him. We might not think of it that way at the time. And we don't really understand how this can be, anyway. But none of that matters. Neither Jesus' words nor this ancient story about hospitality seem concerned with sorting out the fine points of how to identify and describe the presence of the divine. What they do is make a connection between the presence of God and practice of hospitality.

In the Bible there doesn't seem to be much distinction between welcoming others and welcoming God. Feeding strangers is as much a spiritual practice as taking time for prayer, and is every bit as likely to result in meeting God.

I guess it's a matter of making hospitable space – which is holy space, really – in our lives, our hearts, our church, our homes, our friend circles, our community, our society. When we make that space, both God and neighbors – friends or strangers - can come in.

There are so many ways it can happen: a church service that allows little kids to make a bit of noise, a warming center where each one who comes is treated like a person, a zoom gathering that invites quiet attention to the presence of God, a pride picnic, a coffee hour table of goodies and a communion table where all are welcome.

It's attentive and patient listening, allowing others to be themselves, openness to new ideas, letting someone new into your heart and life. It's making time, making a meal, offering a place of respite. It's making room in your heart and awareness for the concerns of other people, other communities. It's seeing the humanity and the image of God in those we've been urged to look on with suspicion or disdain. It's openness to hearing God's voice, encountering God's presence in a new way or an unexpected place.

Hospitality, understood this way, is holy; it's of God. In the practice of holy hospitality, we both encounter and reflect the presence of God.

One commentator puts it like this:

"Under the oaks of Mamre, Abraham and Sarah cleared the necessary space to make room in their lives for some strangers.... [Isn't that more or less] ... what God did for all of us in the beginning? God made room for a whole universe of creatures not like ... [God's] self. And then after those who most closely bore ... [God's] own image fell away, God again set out to make room for us prodigals to come home one day even as a certain prodigal in a story ... Jesus once told came home to a feast that, like [the one in] Genesis 18, also involved a fatted calf. And ... Jesus assured us that God is still making room for us." (Hoezee)

Scott Hoezee, "Genesis 18:1-15," Center for Excellence in Preaching website,
<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-06-12>