

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 17, 2024

Welcome the Stranger

Genesis 18:1-15

One of the reasons you're here today is because God is a great host. Sometimes we can get so accustomed to coming to church that we forget we're here because of God's hospitality, God's welcome, God's invitation. The doors of this place weren't just opened by the first person who showed up here this morning with a key. No, at a deeper level, God is the one who has opened the doors of his house and has told us we may enter. God receives us into his presence. God feeds us and refreshes us. God sends us forth renewed for our part in his ongoing mission in the world. So Sunday morning worship is an experience of God's hospitality.

Several years ago, David Wright wrote a hymn titled, "Come, Brother, Sit with Me." The opening verse says: "Come, brother, sit with me, / sharing this simple bread. / Come, sister, to my home, / drink till you've had your fill. / Who gives these gifts of friendship and table? / None but the living God." Those words capture it well. We're here today because of the open heart and open hands of God, providing for us generously through Christ.

But God is more than just our host. God is also our guest. When our church had its day care ministry, the children had a prayer they used before meals and snacks each day that went like this: "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, let this food to us be blessed. Amen." That prayer is an acknowledgement that we need not only the food that the Lord supplies, but most of all the Lord himself. We need to desire his presence and be receptive to his presence. For example, when one of our deacons opens the Sunday service with our call to worship, he or she is issuing God's invitation, God's summons, for us to gather in God's presence. But you'll notice that this is immediately followed by a prayer in which the deacon leads us in calling upon God to come among us, to be with us. In this way, we welcome the welcoming God into our presence. That's because our life together as God's people, in worship and in every other way, is intended to be a reflection of God's hospitality toward the world.

Today, the idea of hospitality has lost some of the richness and significance that it once held in other times and places. The pace of our lives and the privacy that we cherish often keep us from extending or experiencing the kind of deep hospitality that's more in keeping with God's will and God's way for us. These days, hospitality can mean something as basic as, "Meet me at McDonald's for lunch. I'm buying." Not that there's anything wrong with that. But it's not quite on the same par with the kind of open heart and open door that we see in cases like today's Scripture passage from Genesis, where Abraham welcomes three strangers who show up one day.

Notice that Abraham doesn't rush over to the family tent, peek his head in and say, "Sarah, quickly, look in your purse and see if you've got a little bit of cash that we can give these guys so we can just get rid of them and send them on their way." No, Abraham extends the traditional Middle Eastern signs of hospitality: water for washing their feet, a place to rest beneath the shade of a tree, bread and meat to eat. In fact, though he starts out with fairly

modest plans, Abraham eventually serves up nothing but the best. Instead of just a bottle of water and a loaf of bread, the visitors end up getting meat from a tender calf, some milk and butter, and cakes made from fine flour. So this isn't just a case of spontaneous, front porch ministry to the needy. No, this is full-blown hospitality. This is the kind of welcome that takes strangers and turns them into guests.

As I said, hospitality is still part of our lives and part of our culture. In fact, nowadays it's an entire industry, encompassing fields like lodging, restaurants, event planning, theme parks, transportation, and much more. Universities and colleges even offer concentrations and degrees in hospitality business management. All of this is evidence that in our society, we know how to do hospitality, and do it right, and do it profitably. Beyond the dollars and cents, we even know how to do hospitality in our homes when we invite family, friends, or neighbors to join us for a meal, to hang out together, or perhaps even to stay for a few days. Some of you are involved in that process right now as you plan for hosting a Thanksgiving gathering. And here in the church, we know how to do hospitality on a regular basis, especially through our fellowship meals.

But there's a difference between hospitality as an industry, a course of study, an event, and hospitality as a way of life. For Abraham and Sarah, hospitality wasn't simply a plan, a technique, or an activity. It was simply the way that you did things. It was part of the fabric of daily life. Note also that it's a deeply spiritual act. In today's Scripture passage, hospitality becomes the occasion for an encounter with God. At first, Abraham and Sarah don't realize that these visitors are God manifesting himself to them. But we shouldn't rush to criticize them for not seeing clearly. We too look back at events and experiences which seem so ordinary and routine to us at the time, yet in retrospect realize that it was God appearing at the door of our lives, that it was God intervening, moving, and working to accomplish something in us and through us.

This morning's text is primarily a story about God, about God showing up to restate and reaffirm his promise that Abraham and Sarah will have a child, and that through the gift of this child God's saving purposes will go forward. But human hospitality helps create the space where God comes in to do what he wants to do. True, Abraham and Sarah are still struggling with the announcement of something that seems very unlikely, in fact, downright impossible, to them. Sarah still laughs at the prospect of a baby being created in her seemingly dead womb. Yet God's word is solid and his promises trustworthy. What he has said will happen will happen. And the way that Abraham and Sarah welcome strangers is an essential part of how it will happen.

Through three strangers, God shows that he doesn't intend to be a stranger. Through three visitors, God himself visits. Notice how the visiting stranger can be the means through which God reveals himself and his purpose. No wonder the writer of Hebrews, looking back on the story of Abraham and Sarah, says, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2). This certainly isn't the only place in Scripture where hospitality is urged. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament pay lots of attention to the plight of the stranger, and to how the stranger should be received. Not simply because God's grace obligates us to do so, but primarily because strangers often bring the presence of God with them, which means that the way we treat other people, especially strangers and outsiders, signals the way that we treat God.

It's one thing to talk about being hospitable to those we know, to those who know us, to those who are close to us, to those who are like us. But it's another thing to talk about welcoming those who are new to us, those who are different from us, those who are strangers to us. Remember that this community called the church is itself the result of

God's hospitality, God's way of welcoming sinners into fellowship with himself through Christ, and enabling us to welcome one another into the fellowship of Christ's people. That kind of in-house fellowship is important. But we shouldn't allow the closeness of our own fellowship to shut the door on others whom we need to welcome.

One pastor tells a story about two women who were part of a congregation he once served. These women loved attending the church. They were active and heavily involved in its ministry. They led classes, started women's groups, organized social events, and went on retreats together. They were great friends, fun to be with, and deeply devoted to the church. But one day they got a surprise when another friend suddenly commented to them, "You know, sometimes when the two of you are together, there just isn't any room for anyone else." Sadly, instead of making some adjustments in their attitudes and behaviors so they could open the circle to make room for others, these two women left and went to another church together.¹

One of the primary ways that God visits us with life-giving power is through the coming of new people and new relationships into our church and into our lives. Most of us here today have been here plenty of times before. But maybe some of you can remember when you walked through those doors for the first time. Maybe you can remember what it was like to be a stranger in this worship gathering. But with time and hospitality, you went from being a stranger to being a familiar face in this fellowship of faith. And yet, at the same time, there are others here, just a few seats away from you, whom you hardly know. Even in a small congregation like ours, I sometimes get asked, Who is so and so? Or, Who is that person who sits in such and such pew each Sunday? Or, who is the person who sang that song for special music? As much as we may know each other, there's still a lot of strangeness to be overcome, a lot of welcoming that still needs to be done.

That can be hard to do in today's culture where there's increasing distrust and fear of others. We're much more cautious about who's coming in and out of our lives and our space. We install motion detectors and security systems. We put a camera next to the door on our front porch. We zealously defend our privacy. We move around daily in an atmosphere of heightened suspicion. As one commentator on today's Scripture passage has put it, "Modern life has made strangers of us all, and in so doing it has left us strangers not only to ourselves but to the God who often appears in strange visitations."²

This is why, as followers of the way of Jesus, we need to have the Lord give us hospitable, welcoming hearts. That's because hospitality is more than just a technique, a method, or a matter of good etiquette. Hospitality is an attitude. It's a way of living. It's an orientation on life that involves openness to others and receptivity to new relationships, especially with those whose reality, experiences, and perspectives are very different from your own. Hospitality doesn't mean that you surrender your beliefs and convictions, but it does mean that you keep your life open to those who may have had many other doors closed in their face, for whatever reasons.

It could be the person who comes by the church seeking some financial or material assistance. It could be the immigrant whose family just moved in down the street. It could be your coworker whose religious background is very different from yours. It could be a new member of the church with whom you disagree. It could be an old member of the church whom you hardly know. It could be a family member with whom you need to reconcile. It could be your elderly neighbor whom you only see when they come out to check the mail. It could be a classmate who's been bullied. It could be your own spouse to whom you've grown cold and distant.

Remember that when Abraham and Sarah showed hospitality to their unexpected visitors, they weren't just welcoming strangers. They were also welcoming God. However much they did or didn't realize it, they were opening themselves up to the presence of God and the work of God, which means that your own receptiveness to those who are strangers, your openness to outsiders, is one of the key indicators of your own spiritual health, and a living expression of God's hospitality toward each of us, and toward the world, in Jesus Christ.

¹ "Radical Hospitality," September 14, 2008. http://www.thenewstjohns.com/pdfs/Radical_Hospitality_Sept14.pdf.

² Wallace M. Allston, Jr. "Genesis 18:1-11, Expository Article." *Interpretation* (October 1988) 401.