

## “Welcoming Led to Laughter”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Genesis 18:1-15

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.

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

It was 1982 and I was on an airplane to spend my junior year of college in England. I was going to study abroad at a manor owned by the University of Evansville called Harlaxton College. I was 20 years old. I was excited. I was scared. I was alone. I had just made my connecting flight at JFK to fly onto London. The woman sitting next to me had never met me but she must have sensed all the many feelings that were reeling inside me. She began to talk to me asking questions about myself and sharing information about herself. I learned that Margaret Nash lived in Grimsby, which was not far from where I would be studying. Her warm smile and smart British accent calmed my nerves. When my plane landed, she helped me with my luggage and led me to the correct subway, which would take me to the train station.

During my 7 months at school, Margaret came to visit me at Harlaxton and she invited me to her home. She served me hot tea in my room in the morning, made me homemade Yorkshire pudding and roast beef, and showed me all her favorite places. Since then, she has invited my parents into her home a couple of times. Jim and I have returned to visit as well as my daughter, Bethany. Every time we see Margaret, we experience her amazing gift of hospitality. When my husband and I got married, she could not come but sent special handmade lace from Nottingham, which Jim’s grandmother used to make my veil. Margaret welcomes us into her life and makes us feel very special.

Have you ever received hospitality like this? How does it feel when people welcome you into their lives and make you feel special? How does it feel to extend hospitality, to offer a warm cooked meal, a helping hand or your home to someone?

Abraham and Sarah show us today what hospitality looked like in the Bible. When Abraham receives a knock on his tent from 3 strangers, he puts down everything and welcomes them. “Come in,” he says, “take off your dusty sandals and I will wash your feet.”

He shouts to Sarah to quickly get out the Pillsbury Gold Medal flour and make some fresh bread for these strangers. While the 3 are resting under the shade of the tree, Abraham goes with his servant to select the finest calf. He tells him to prepare the best filet mignon for dinner. All of this was done with haste!

In those times, hospitality was about survival. As folks were passing through the wilderness and even in towns, they did not have the luxury of staying in hotels. They had to rely on others to welcome them and give them food, water and shelter.

Hospitality begins in Genesis but we can find it sprinkled throughout the Bible. God gives the Israelites manna and water as they wander through the wilderness for 40 years. God writes a new law on the heart of his people when they enter the promise land telling them to “love the foreigner” because “they were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

Jesus was no stranger in receiving hospitality. It is the innkeeper, who offers hospitality to Mary and Joseph as they frantically search for shelter in Bethlehem as Mary goes into labor. Jesus was welcomed into the house of Martha and Mary and taught the sisters that it was not the preparing of food that was the most important but listening to him. Jesus goes onto teach us that when we give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty and welcome the stranger we are actually doing it to him.

This teaching was not just for the people back then. As Christians today, we are called to reach out to others and invite them into our churches, our lives and our hearts. We will do this next week at Vacation Bible School. There will be children from our community, who we have never met, come into our doors. We will laugh and have fun together. We will play and eat with each other. We will sing together. But most importantly, we will learn about God’s good news from each other. We all have these amazing gifts that we have to share and we will never experience those gifts if we don’t invite others into our lives.

It is true that Manuela Ek de Novak and Jon and Kelly Simpson are no strangers to us. But, there was a time when we did not know them. Kelly Simpson’s father was a missionary in El Salvador and he welcomed a medical team into his home and church to help those in need. From there, our relationship has blossomed from that one act of hospitality. Jon and Kelly have welcomed us into their home when we traveled to New Orleans for RHINO. We have continued to host them during VBS thanks to Ginny and Gary Shaw, Sue and Betty Hartman.

Manuela Ek de Novak, first came to John Knox from Mexico to help with Todo Nuevo – Everything New. VBS offered to our Hispanic neighbors through the leadership of Felipe Martinez in 2004. Felipe reached out to our congregation to host the helpers from Mexico in their homes. One of the couples that opened their homes was Barb and Bob Weetman. It is no surprise then that this year, Manuela will be returning and she will be staying with Barb.

In the book, Practicing Our Faith, writes in the Hospitality chapter, “To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him or her as a human being made in God’s image: it is to treat them as one of equal worth with ourselves – indeed as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own.

Hospitality can be key to opening up new cultural avenues to explore and share with each other. I can’t imagine my life and how different it would be if my parents would not have opened their home to so many foreign exchange students. I would not be going to Germany in several weeks to meet up with my German daughter, Rebekka. But, because of a simple act of hospitality, we are going to see Rebekka and her boyfriend, Max after 9 years when we first opened up our home and hearts to her.

Frank last week preached about the decision we made to stay in this community and commit ourselves to serving this neighborhood. I am the first to say that I have been blessed time after time after time by offering hospitality to folks in our surrounding area. Strangers, who have walked through our doors, have been welcomed. We have given them food, water, clothing and medicine. I have even purchased underwear for one of our neighbors. We have listened to their stories and we have helped give them shelter. They have learned from us and we have learned from them.

But hospitality comes with a risk. You don't know the stranger that walks through our doors. We don't know their personal history unless they chose to share it. Unfortunately, in our society, we have to be cautious and be mindful of our safety. There are times that we have to say "no" to hospitality and show tough love. Yes, there are times when we get burned.

This past week, my wallet was stolen out of my office. Kim had a doctor's appointment and Frank had stepped out for 20 minutes to get something for lunch. Carolyn Lyons and I were in Fellowship Hall working on painting VBS scenery. After I discovered my wallet missing, Frank pulled up the camera footage and we discovered who we think took it. This person wasn't in the office more than 1 ½ minutes. It is clear that Frank walked in 2 minutes after she left. We had just helped this person the day before this happened.

As I sat with the story of Abraham and Sarah this week, I kept asking myself how do I view the stranger that walks into our church? How do I view anyone that has done me wrong when I think about the call from Christ to extend hospitality? Do I put my defenses up and not open up myself to the risk? Will I be more reserved when it comes to grabbing my finest flour to make bread or filling the basin with water to wash their feet?

This is when I need to hear the end of the story in Genesis. The strangers ask Abraham, "Where is Sarah, your wife? How do they know her name? Are they clearly God's messengers in their midst? Then, comes the promise of something so impossible. Sarah is going to have a baby! At the ripe old age of 100 years old, Abraham is told to prepare the nursery. Abraham resurrect your dream that had long ago died. Ninety year old Sarah over hears this from inside the tent. She is overcome with laughter and not just a giggle, but a laugh to you cry outburst. And when the messengers question Sarah on why she laughed, she simply denies it. This act of hospitality was met with an amazing gift. Please don't doubt Sarah that nothing is too wonderful for God or as the Message says, "Please remember that nothing is too hard for God."

We have to keep offering hospitality and welcoming the stranger into our church, our lives and our hearts despite the risks. Why? Because, God tells us that the reward far out weighs the risks! Because NOTHING IS TOO WONDERFUL OR TOO HARD FOR GOD! Thanks be to God! All God's people say, Amen!