

“A Matter of Life or Death!”

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Scripture

Genesis 18:1- 10, Ezekiel 16:49

Genesis 18:1 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. **2** 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. **3** He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. **4** Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. **5** 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." **6** And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." **7** Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. **8** 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.

9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." **10** Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Ezekiel 16:49 As I live, says the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. **49** This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.

Sermon

First off, I want to thank John for coming up with this year's Advent theme: "The Hope of Hospitality." The focus for this morning is "the table" or as John points out, "the most cherished and common symbols of hospitality around the world."

The Lord's table was key to welcoming and commissioning the disciples. A table is the common symbol for welcoming friends and strangers to food and conversation -- a place of holy welcome. Here at FCMF, we are known throughout the county for serving up a table of hospitality for anyone in need."

However, in my personal experience, if you want to experience truly deep hospitality you may have to travel outside the U.S. since most other countries really do put us to shame. Additionally, again in my own personal experience, you will likely find the most sincere hospitality in some of the poorest places in our world.

Also, once you have left our borders you will also realize that "the Table" for many in our world is in actuality a floor!

Friends, family, strangers from near and far gather around either a simple blanket or an ornate tapestry, to share food, warm coffee or tea, laughter, and healing conversations. Around this “table cloth” folks will kneel, squat, “criss-cross applesauce” or sit side saddle while wielding their spoons or chopsticks, and in many places, just their fingers.

Ignorant of Emily Post and the appropriate decorum for dining, soup is slurped loudly, folks talk with their mouths full and belly laugh as they spit chicken bones outside the circle for the dogs and cats to cleanup. Well, at least these are some of my own, most memorable times of being welcomed with the warmest of hospitality.

From times long before Abraham, the Bedouin have crisscrossed the most forbidding environments of the Middle East. Travel through those parts, even today, can still be rather dicey. But especially in those times of Abraham, hospitality for folks in those parts would have been a matter of life or death.

On several trips with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), I was privileged to be welcomed by the Bedouin of southern Israel to sit for tea and a “snack” of pita bread, hummus, figs, and olives. Though many have taken to a more semi-nomadic existence and live much of the year in hollow block homes, the Bedouin of Sinai deserts of southern Israel still have tents to gather in during the hottest times of the year. They also must live in tents now from time to time, because the Israeli military destroy their rural villages to depopulate the countryside and concentrate them into cities.

This displacement is occurring so Israel can “reclaim” the Bedouins’ ancestral land to plant forests to stop erosion and for the good of the nation. But as soon as the Bedouins rebuild their homes, the Israeli military returns to destroy them again. And so, after a while, tents are actually a much better solution since they are easier to replace.

But the Bedouin hospitality is clearly genuine, honed over thousands of years, just as it was in the time of Abraham. So, when I think of hospitality, I immediately think of those Bedouin who welcomed me so graciously as they also lamented the loss, not only of their homes, but their ancient way of life.

That is why this story of Abraham comes to mind when I think of a Biblical example of true hospitality. Living on the fringes of the desert, Father Abraham of both the Muslim and the Jewish people would have been a Bedouin - a transient who moved as his flocks required new pasture. In the desert, towns and other transient camps would have been few and far between. So as a traveler himself at times, he too would have likely known firsthand the necessity of receiving hospitality.

And since it had likely been a matter of life or death for him, he too felt the need and obligation to provide hospitality to others. Even to compel, in this case, three sketchy characters, to stop, wash up, rest, drink and dine on the finest that he could provide. Good thing too, since these guys just happened to be heavenly messengers bearing good, if not improbable news. But as he was saving them from the harshness of the wilderness, they in turn, saved his lineage from coming to the end of the line, as well as rescued Sarah from her barrenness.

And these messengers also had other business to attend to, and miles to go before again needing hospitality from Abraham’s nephew Lot in the notorious city of Sodom. An evil city

that was soon destroyed, due, at least according to the prophet Ezekiel, because their “pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Hospitality, or specifically the lack there of, is a matter of life or death, not only for the potential guest traveling across a barren landscape but for the wealthy and well heeled potential host as well!

But true hospitality, as we know, is never just a singular event, nor is it a mere annual event on the calendar. Hospitality is part of the culture. It’s a part of the daily ritual of life and it should never be taken for granted. True hospitality is both generous giving, as well as joyous receiving. After all, how can you give true hospitality unless you have first also experienced it?

For Christians, “The Table” represents all the wondrous outpouring of a generous God, a place where each of us is welcome, and where there is always space enough for everyone... and more than enough good food for all. A symbolic reminder that we will receive all that we need to sustain us now, as well as a promise that extends into eternity!

Now when I imagine that last supper that Jesus had with his disciples, I no longer visualize DaVinci’s painting. I’m actually pretty sure it looked nothing like that - after all when have you ever gathered around a table with friends and family and sat only on one side of the table? What I envision is everyone gathered on the floor around a simple blanket, maybe even a few of them sitting on the steps or lounging along the walls.

But of course, we know that the meaning of “the Table” is far more than as a mere piece of furniture; it is a much more powerful symbol of what is true hospitality; an insistent welcome, genuine compassion, joy filled generosity; a place of laughter and of tears and a place where we sit comfortably in the presence of our loving God!

A space made Holy not only by our efforts, but because God is also there!

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