

September 12, 2010
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Genesis 18:1-8
24th Sunday OT

A church that is welcoming

(Slide #1 – put up as I am introducing the scripture.)

It is hard to believe that it was a year ago that we were worshiping down at Cedar Memorial and that within the week we would be here – in this beautiful new facility. While the building has been completed and most of the ‘new construction’ kinks have been worked out – the work of building continues. I am not talking about the siding that they are putting on the garage – but I am talking about the building of community – the building of this community.

The leadership group – with your help – has drawn up a plan. We call it our vision. This plan is rooted in who we believe God is calling us to be and therefore what God is calling us to do. We have shared it with over one quarter of the membership of this church and you have agreed with us.

And now the work of building is beginning. The first step in any building project is to lay out a sound foundation. The pillars of our foundation are found in our core beliefs.

We believe that we are called to be a community (people in relationship with one another) – whose lives are centered in Jesus Christ (people in relationship with God through Jesus Christ) - and who have been called to witness to this relationship with Jesus Christ through the way we

welcome, care, are generous, and are obedient to Jesus' call that we should grow in our love of God and of one another.

These four pillars are our core beliefs. – They are (say them with me):

Welcoming

Caring

Growing

Generous

Today I am going to begin a series that will help us look at these 4 core beliefs and to think about what steps we will have to take if we are going to be a community that is known by these beliefs.

We are a church that is welcoming. –

Why – because God in Jesus Christ welcomes all people;

the Jew and the Gentile,

the sinner and the saint,

the outcast and the insider,

the untouchables of society and the 'rock stars'

ordinary folks like you and me – and extra-ordinary people

Because God in Jesus Christ

Doesn't wait for us to get our theology right

Doesn't wait for us to get our lives right

Instead he reaches out to us – not in hostility – but in hospitality.

Our story this morning from Genesis is a story about 'hospitality' – 'hospitality' is the practice of welcoming – of gladly receiving and putting to ease another.

Our story begins with Abraham sitting outside his tent – in the heat of the day – when three men appear. You and I have been given insight about these 'strangers' – 'The Lord appeared to Abraham' – but Abraham doesn't have a clue.

Not let me say this before going on – different interpreters understand the identity of these three men in different ways. Some would say that the 3 are angels – messengers sent by God to deliver a message. – Some think that the Lord himself appears – accompanied by two angels – possibly heavenly body guards. Some like to toy with the notion that this is a Trinitarian expression – the Lord appears Father, Son, and Spirit – but there is not much support for that kind of notion.

I find the important thing for us to note is that the presence of God is present in these three strangers and that Abraham doesn't recognize them for anything other than being 'strangers' traveling.

Abraham also recognizes his duty to welcome them – to provide hospitality to them.

John Koenig in writing about 'hospitality' writes that the stories of hospitality found in the Hebrew Scriptures "*usually illustrates Bedouin traditions having to do with a resident's obligation to nourish and protect travelers who find themselves in hostile environments.*" (Anchor Bible Dictionary, Book 3 pg.299)

So what does this hospitality look like? I want us to take note of three things that Abraham offers that are the core of hospitality.

First, is that Abraham offers his attention – he simply notices the three and he is attentive to their needs.

- Abraham looks up and sees these three men.
- Abraham can see that they are travelers –
 - He offers them water for their feet.
 - He offers rest.
 - He offers them bread.
- Notice too that Abraham does not impose himself on these travelers but he offers and he allows them to decide whether they will accept the hospitality or not.

Abraham offers his attention – not simply at first – but throughout the visit. After serving the visitors – Abraham stands by them under the tree while they eat.

Secondly, Abraham offers the gift of time. He runs from the tent to meet them – he hastens to make the preparations for their meal. Let us not confuse this running and the hastening –

Abraham is not in a rush to get through his responsibilities as a host – instead these words represent a sense of urgency – in caring for his guest. This meal would have taken hours to prepare – and Abraham offers the gift of his time – setting aside everything else in order to make his quest his most urgent priority. (STOP)

Lastly, we see in this story of exceptional hospitality that Abraham offers the best of himself. He doesn't skimp. He tells Sarah to use the best flour – not the stuff that has been in the cupboard for a year – that has turned moldy or is full of worms.

Not only does he offer the best of himself – but offers more than is expected. What Abraham offers at the beginning of the story is this - a little water for their feet – a little rest from their travels – a little bread before they move on – but what he brings them is a feast – meat, cheese and milk.

There are three things for us to learn about being a welcoming church from Abraham. All of them have to do with not only being welcoming but with being generous – for to be welcoming we will have to offer our attention - our time – and the very best of ourselves.

Hospitality – is really about the outsider. It is about those we don't know or maybe don't want to know - the stranger – the foreigner – outcast – those politically – ideologically different than us.

Didn't Jesus welcome them all?

Wasn't he accused of eating with sinners?

Didn't he touch the untouchable?

Didn't he invite – the little children to come unto him?

Didn't he ask – the weary to come to him that he might give them rest?

Who will we be willing to welcome – to extend hospitality to?

- The sinner and the saint
- The rich and the poor
- The illegal and the blue blood
- The aged and the infant
- The liberal and the conservative.
- The gay/lesbian person – and the one who opposes their life style.

We are called – in Jesus Christ – to welcome all people – because God in Jesus Christ welcomes us. Paul writes to the church in Roman that they should '*welcome one another – just as Christ has welcomed them.*' (Romans 15:7)

What was it that Koenig said about Bedouin hospitality? – it was about the '*resident's obligation to nourish and protect travelers who find themselves in hostile environments.*'

The church is a hostile environment for many people

- people who have never been inside of a church
- people who have been injured – rejected – labeled - by the church
- people who don't know about the things we believe
- people for whom we speak a foreign language

And we have been called to be a community that provides hospitality to them.

To do this we will have to offer ourselves – we will have to lay aside our own wants and needs – and we will have to offer our attention. We cannot ignore those who are different than us – those who we do not know – those who make us uncomfortable. We must acknowledge their presence (We do this by saying hello – by offering our name – and by asking their name. We do this by asking about them – sincerely – how they are – what they are up to.)

We must also be attentive to their spoken and unspoken needs. A bathroom – a place to sit – help with a bulletin – to be left alone – for refreshment – for conversation – for care.

To be a church that is welcoming means that we will have to offer our time.

When Donna and I were in Ghana – visiting a rural church in Peche – the members of that church took time away from their jobs – their homes – their families – in order to welcome us – to make us feel at home – in that far away place.

Time, maybe, our most precious asset and it is our most precious gift.

To offer time to others means we will have to set aside our own agendas – in order to take time to greet – to share – to ask – to listen – to act – on behalf of another.

To be a church that is welcoming means that we will have to offer our best to others.

Donna and I knew some people who in an act of generosity would bring us Salmon and other things. It seemed like a nice and hospitable thing. The fact of the matter is – that they were just cleaning out their freeze – the fish and everything else was freezer burned – inedible – we were just a way for them to feel good about getting rid of their trash.

To be hospitable – means that we make sure we provide the best of what we have for our guest – for the stranger – for those we don't know and maybe don't want to know. It is a generous act of self giving.

Koenig once again writing about 'hospitality' reminds us that often 'God's will comes to light through an act of hospitality.'

When we practice hospitality – when we are truly welcoming – we experience – we are reminded of God's hospitality.