

## ***Showing Hospitality to Our Neighbours***

Trinity CRC, November 21, 2021 AM

Intentionally Connecting with our Neighbours #4

**Genesis 18:1-15**

Rev. Richard J. deLange

Today we're considering what the Bible says about hospitality. And we're talking about it in the context of the third part of our church's vision statement which is "intentionally connecting with our neighbours" for the glory of God.

So let's look at Genesis 18 together this morning. Our focus is on verses 1-8 but we'll read through v.15.

Genesis 18:1 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

<sup>3</sup> He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.

<sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

<sup>6</sup> So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

<sup>7</sup> Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set **these** before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

<sup>9</sup> "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

<sup>10</sup> Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

<sup>15</sup> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

**This is the Word of the Lord.**

Dear family of God at Trinity,

It was three years ago this month—November 4, 2018—that my family sat up front here and shared our story of God’s presence and provision through the previous 8 months. In March of that year, our 30 year old daughter Rachel had a near deadly brain bleed at her home in Thailand. Throughout the following months as she recovered, we especially felt the Lord caring for us through a host of different people.

We experienced the blessings of Christian hospitality.

From the moment we found out that Rachel was fighting for her life, God’s people came and surrounded us with their love and good gifts. The support and prayers carried on for the coming months from people in this congregation. Endless emails and Facebook messages. Cards and cheques and phone calls and food vouchers, even tickets. Council gave me three months off to help my family and you all did whatever you could think of to support us from a distance.

In Thailand the hospitality was also great. A missionary couple who was away for three months gave Patsy and me their apartment just minutes from the hospital. A man who owned a restaurant brought us lunch—delicious and healthy food—every single day and wouldn’t take any money for it. The local pastors came to Rachel’s hospital room to pray with us many different times. The church community there supported us with visits, food, babysitting, rides and more. Anything and everything we needed was provided.

Yes, we experienced the finest blessings of Christian hospitality.

Hospitality is always for the sake of others. We’re not hospitable for our own sake but for the love of our neighbours!

We see this in our Bible reading from Genesis 18. In the middle-eastern culture—like many places in the world today—hospitality is a high value. Abraham sees strangers in the distance. And without hardly thinking, it seems, he pulls out all the stops to ensure they are welcomed and comfortable. It’s an incredible story of hospitality that is part of a larger picture where the Lord reassures Abraham and Sarah of his promise to give them a son.

As we read this story, particularly the first 8 verses, join me, first of all, in looking at some of the actions that mark hospitality.

## **Marks of Hospitality**

### **a. Attentiveness**

One of the first things I notice is attentiveness. If you really want to care for others, you need to be attentive to their needs. Genesis 18:1&2 talks about Abraham sitting outside of his tent—in the shade—because it is the hottest part of the day. He notices three men standing nearby. Perhaps if he had been a little more attentive, he

would have noticed them coming sooner. But he now sees them nearby and his attention is on them. Fully on them!

Attentiveness includes servant-heartedness which we see in Abraham bowing to the ground as he greets his guests. To be attentive, we should be ready to serve. Our attentiveness and service is essential to hospitality. And along with that comes passion. The place God calls us to serve is most often something we are already passionate about. We **can't** meet every need we are aware of but perhaps we can think of one or two needs that are within our ability and maybe within our passions. These are areas in which we likely already have a sense of attentiveness.

My nephew was pretty heavy into drugs, maybe 20 years ago. I think it was crystal meth at the time. Thanks be to God, he broke free from that addiction and is living a healthy life now. But what I find so wonderful about him is that he now regularly goes to the park in his town where the drug addicts hang out. Why? He just takes time to be with them, to be attentive to their needs. That's one way that he serves.

And it's clear why he's passionate about that type of service—he knows that he could have been one of those people, but for the grace of God. He's aware of a need in his community and he's got some insights and passion that move him to serve in that area. Maybe even better stated, he has a great awareness of how God's grace has touched his life and that enables him to be attentive to others and serve them with the same sort of gracious attitude he has enjoyed from the Lord and other people.

We must always remember that Jesus came to an inhospitable world! He came to bring us into the riches of a glorious relationship with God. But instead of being welcomed and loved, he was rejected, despised, tortured and killed. And through his suffering we have been guaranteed a home with God. We are given the greatest hospitality of all because God was attentive to our need and set out to meet it in Jesus.

Now switch back to Abraham. We don't know how much time has elapsed between chapter 17 and 18 but we do know the author of this book has set up the stories intentionally. The Lord has put his book together for us with great care and probably much deeper design than most of us will ever understand. Chapter 17 is the story of God making his covenant with Abraham and sealing it with the sign of the promise. Granted it was not a pleasant thing for a 99 year old man to be circumcised but that was a sign of God's grace, God's hospitality if you will. God intentionally welcoming Abraham into a lifelong relationship of love and security as well as eternal blessings.

Now Abraham welcomes three strangers. We happen to know that one of those three men is God and the other two are angels, but Abraham doesn't know this. He only sees three men whom he's never seen before and he moves into action to serve them with the same sort of grace he's experienced from God.

You see, Abraham was shown grace. He was called out of the darkness of paganism that he practiced and welcomed into a relationship with the living and almighty God. Paganism's gods were all about protecting yourself—getting on the right side of the gods and trying to avoid their wrath. In paganism, you live with uncertainty because you never know if you've done the right thing or enough of it. But now Abraham is in a relationship with God who has come to him personally. God has promised Abraham that he'll be there for him. That he has a plan for him. And that he's not going to disappear from the scene or expect Abraham to meet his needs in order to receive blessings. No, God gives his stand alone promise, a promise with no strings attached. He says, "I am your God and you are my people!" just like we sang a little while ago. Period.

Out of the bosom of God's grace, Abraham's heart grows attentive. He is attentive to the needs of his neighbours, even strangers, and he treats them with grace as he himself has been shown by God.

### **b. Intentionality**

The second mark of hospitality that I see is intentionality. Abraham sees what his guests need and knows what he wants to do about it. With the same sort of lavish grace he received from the Lord, he sets out to spread a lavish feast for his guests. His intentionality comes out in the word "hurry" and other related words we see in our text.

In verse 2 we read, *Abraham... **hurried** from the entrance of his tent to meet them...* In v.6 ...*Abraham **hurried** into the tent to Sarah.*

Then "**Quick**," he said, get the ingredients to bake bread.

Then v.7 *he **ran** to select a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who **hurried** to prepare it.*

He understood the needs of his guests and intentionally did all that was necessary to meet those needs. His focus was on the guests. He knew that people travelling in the desert would appreciate water to wash themselves a little as well as food to strengthen them for their journey.

I wonder if **we** don't provide the hospitality we are capable of giving because we overthink it. I'm not suggesting we should be careless but sometimes we are perhaps too careful rather than intentional. We think of everything that could go wrong. I might say the wrong thing to them. I might burn the potatoes. They might not like what I prepare. But **when** we think that way, we think more about how we will look to them than about trying to help certain people.

Imagine an Alberta farmer watching the news coming out of BC this past week. He senses a need and knows he can do something about it. So he loads his truck up with hay for cows and finds a way to get to a BC farmer whose farm is under 6 feet of water and whose cows are now living elsewhere off the generosity of others. Can you imagine the Alberta farmer offering his goods to the BC farmer and that farmer saying, "No thanks, my cows don't eat Alberta hay!"?

When it comes to being hospitable to people, we need to realize that food is not always the main reason people appreciate our hospitality. Whether the food is exceptional and top notch is not as significant as the fact that you recognize a need and invite someone to receive what you have to offer. The guests will appreciate the food but also the kindness and love of your warm hospitality.

I think it might even be true that those of us who are wealthy worry much more about how our hospitality will come across than those who have less. When I think of the time I've been in Nicaragua or Cuba, some of the poorest places I've been, the people are always hospitable. They have little but they prepared it as best they can and serve it with love. Most meals are rice and beans but always taste fine and I feel the love and fellowship with which it is served.

The point of being intentional in our hospitality is that we focus on what we can provide, not on whether we think people will think well or poorly of us. And that's true whether we're talking about providing food, lodging or anything else. Even hay for a neighbour's cows.

### **c. Extravagance**

Aside from being attentive and intentional, we also can be extravagant. Again, as we look at Abraham's example in Genesis 18, this is what we discover. One commentator wrote:

...It is often said that Abraham offers (his guests) typical desert hospitality, though his hospitality looks more extravagant than anything anyone would regularly offer. If they were three men who needed just a burger to keep them going for the next leg of their journey, their eyes would surely roll [in pleasant shock] when they realized Abraham was setting about killing the fatted calf.... (Likewise) It is said that when the prodigal father *runs* out to meet the prodigal son, he is behaving with a lack of dignity that would be unaccustomed for a respectable Middle Eastern man, and the same would apply to Abraham. In other words, the entire story underlines the extravagant nature of Abraham's hospitality.

Perhaps the best way to describe Abraham's kindness to these strangers is that he treated them like family. Think about it. Abraham didn't interview his guests first of all to see if they were royalty or drug addicts or even con artists. He didn't think to himself, "Well, these people look poorly dressed so I'll give them some freezer-burned burger patties." In our story, Abraham gets the best of everything. Again, it's a great picture of someone who has experienced the lavishness of God's goodness and is ready to show the same sort of extravagance to others, even strangers. He gives them his best.

I don't know about you but all too often I find myself judging people based on their outward appearances. I make up their background story without actually getting to know them. Sometimes I presume the worst. She must be a drug addict. He must have made bad choices in life. Abraham models non-judgmental, extravagant hospitality, much like the father of the prodigal son and much like God graciously shows to us.

So as we seek to love our neighbours, keep in mind these three marks of hospitality we find in this story of Abraham serving unexpected guests: attentiveness, intentionality and extravagance.

## **The Fruit of Hospitality**

So, then, knowing what hospitality can look like, let me end with quickly thinking about some of the fruit of hospitality. What happens to us when we become hospitable?

### **a. We Become Servants of the Lord**

Abraham didn't realize it until later, but as he provided hospitality to strangers, he was serving the Lord and the Lord's messengers, angels. The book of Hebrews ends with a "matter of fact" statement about hospitality.

*Heb 13:1 Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. <sup>2</sup> Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*

I don't think Hebrews is suggesting that every person we help is a disguised angel or the Lord himself visiting us as he visited Abraham. But it does mean that every time we help others, we are answering the Lord's call to love our neighbours. We are passing the test of being a Christian. When we love our neighbours with genuine hospitality, we are doing it unto Jesus in some spiritual and mysterious way. We are serving him as we serve others in his name.

Remember, Jesus willingly sacrificed for us and by faith in him and the power of the Holy Spirit, we willingly sacrifice our worldly comforts and resources for the good of others. The more we reflect on what Jesus has done for us, the more we realize that all the things we value and treasure in this life are not as important as loving others. We do it because he's done so much for us and we want our life to reflect his love and grace to us.

Jesus himself in Matthew 25 talks about caring for the poor, the prisoners and the sick. He says this is how we show love to him. In that chapter, Jesus talks about the final judgement when those who have lived for him are welcomed to their heavenly home. But the interesting thing is that the people who do the good deeds he mentions don't really recognize it as a hardship or sacrifice. They aren't keeping track. They are just doing it. They are answering the call when it arises. Jesus says that on judgement day,

*Mt 25:37 "...the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

*<sup>40</sup> "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

We are blessed to serve others as our Lord has served us. And in the process, we get closer to Jesus. As we love others, we see more of him. We don't do it for that

reason. It's just a wonderful fruit of serving in his name. Our hospitality draws us closer to Jesus.

### **b. We Find Joy in Serving Together**

But, secondly, I don't want you to leave this morning thinking you have to do it alone. As much as we serve the Lord and meet him in some way in the needy, it can be overwhelming to any single one of us to look at all the needs around us and to think, "How can I address that?" This is where it's always important to recognize that the Lord is not speaking to us as individuals first of all. The Bible addresses the Church. The letters to the churches that make up much of the New Testament are for the church as a whole first of all and to the individuals within the context of the larger body of believers.

I think of Paul's **first** letter to the Corinthian Church in chapter 12. There he speaks about the various kinds of spiritual gifts; each of those gifts he recognizes as being for the strengthening of the church. He mentions, for example, if your individual spiritual gift is contributing to the needs of others, do it cheerfully (v.8). But he's not saying you have to do it alone. We function individually within the larger body and together as the body we can practice things like hospitality. So, Paul says to the whole church in Corinth just a few verses later, "Practice hospitality." (12:13).

My sister and her family have a large farm in the Abbotsford area. Thankfully they are not under water and it's looking like they might be one of very few farmers around them who escape the full effects of the flood. Nonetheless, they are on high alert and working countless hours to protect their animals and to help other farmers. Many farmers in their church and the larger community are already under deep water.

Seeing the huge need, their church—Gateway CRC—has organized a massive amount of meals. It's not one person doing this. It's an army of church members. One of the ladies in the church told my sister's family, "her van better be empty when she picks up the food." They've made lots! The church together is feeding all sorts of tired and wet farmers and their families who can't cook for themselves or are just too tired to even try. When a crisis arises, God's people together can do much more than any of us can do alone. And I can assure you that those serving together are being strengthened by the Lord and finding great joy in being hospitable. Ironically, even as they work together to prepare food for others, these attentive, intentional and extravagant givers are enjoying hospitality together in a time of crisis all around them.

But every single day there is a crisis in our city. Homelessness. And, again, we are so blessed to be able to love our neighbours by working together. Yes, every single act of love that we do alone is wonderful and good whether it's handing your lunch over to a person on the street or stopping at the red light and passing someone some money. Abraham met the needs of three strangers. And sometimes we can do the same for small groups. But we can only do so much as individuals.

However, we can work together to provide hospitality to more people or work to address larger needs. That's why we got behind Megan and Carol and others 12 years ago. We've worked together and with other churches to get the Mosaic Centre up and running in order to address homelessness and issues of poverty in our corner of this city. Now 12 years later Mosaic Centre has become a part of a still larger ministry of the Mustard Seed. And we can rejoice that more is being done. None of us could do all this alone.

Individual acts of hospitality are wonderful and important. Keep doing what the Lord lays on your heart. But maybe ask a few other sisters or brothers in Christ to join you so that they also learn the joy of selfless hospitality. But if the hands-on hospitality is simply not something you feel God has gifted you to do, you can still be a supporter, perhaps through prayer, perhaps through monetary donations, perhaps helping to make meals or package things up for a larger group. We can help in the work and ministry of hospitality even though some people will be more upfront and hands-on while others work quietly and diligently behind the scenes.

And that's true internationally too. Very few of us will do what George and Toni have done so many times in going overseas. They are gifted for that. But we can support them and support World Renew and Resonate and Back to God Ministries. Read this "Hunger for Good" devotional from World Renew that's on the back table. Learn more about what God is doing through their work and how we can join in and find greater joy in doing so.

Christian hospitality is not negotiable. It's a fruit of being loved sacrificially by Jesus who lifts us up from the poverty of sin and gives us a secure place in the family of God. His love changes us. His Spirit empowers us. He binds us together and together calls us to love our neighbours. And he uses us to do it.

But it's all by his grace. We must not think too highly of ourselves. God offered hospitality and promises of family to Abraham in Genesis 17 and he laughed in disbelief. Then God made sure Sarah heard those same promises with her own ears in Genesis 18. But Sarah also laughed in disbelief. Nonetheless, their faithlessness is not defeated by God's plan and power. God still does what he set out to do through them. That's not to give us an excuse, but it puts us in our place and rescues us from the burden and guilt of thinking that everything depends on us.

God can handle it all on his own. But he really does want us to come to know the joy of serving. The joy of hospitality given attentively, intentionally and extravagantly. Amen.