

“The Gift of the Unexpected”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Luke 10:38-42 and Genesis 18:1-15

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42

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. Abraham 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."

Genesis 18:1-15

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you offer us your word to teach, to reflect, to encourage, to stretch us to grow. Be with us now as together we consider the word you have laid before us this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

It's always difficult when you have a children's sermon to do when it talks about welcoming strangers. You are always walking this line. But the act of hospitality towards those unknown to us is one of the most important teachings of faith that we have inherited through the Hebrew scriptures. I think it's something we do take seriously here at First Pres. We offer welcome to our guests each month with Room at the Inn and this summer, as we have for the last few summers, we welcomed Young Neighbors in Action for two weeks. Young Neighbors in Actions is a group of youth from around the country who come and work with various community organizations during the day and then they eat, worship and camp out in our building at night. One of the reasons we know this is important is because our youth depend on the hospitality of

others when they are on Work Camp. Every year when they come back, we hear stories of the people they met and broke bread with, the stories they were touched by and the acts of hospitality they experienced. And if you looked at Face Book this week, you saw that they were invited to swim in someone's pool from the church they were staying at on a warm summer evening.

Hospitality and welcome certainly is the focus of this morning's readings. We heard in Genesis that Abraham notices three men standing outside his tent. He doesn't know them. He doesn't know why they are there, but his immediate response is to welcome them. He doesn't just offer them the bare necessities of bread and water. He offers cakes and curd and a calf and a cool place to eat in the shade. So who are these people, and why are they here? Abraham doesn't rush them. He doesn't ask right away. He waits until they have finished their meal and it is then that they give him the message they are there to bring: that he and Sarah are going to have a son. This is the most unexpected visit with the fulfillment of a promise to them that had thus far been elusive.

Now Hebrew scholars have reflected on this story, asking what's really going on here? Is this an actual visit or is it a vision? And who is it that is really there? Consider the fact that the passage opens up with the statement, "the Lord appeared to Abraham at the ancient oaks of Mamre." But then the focus shifts to three men who suddenly appear near the tent. And as the next few verses tumble out, we see that Abraham offers a welcome, refreshment, a meal and then the conversation announcing the arrival of a son. Now it's not only Abraham who hears the message, Sarah hidden by the door of the tent hears it and she laughs. A voice speaks in response to that laugh, but it's not the strangers'. Instead we hear, "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh?' 'Shall I indeed bear a child now that I'm old?' 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Sarah shall have a son.'" Sarah denied laughing for she was afraid. And the Lord said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

So was this a visit or a vision? Who were the men? Were they angels? The word "angel" in Hebrew is not used here but it's found in verses just before and after this. And I found myself thinking of the line from Hebrews with the advice to "welcome strangers among you for you might be entertaining angels unaware." It's a direct reference to Genesis. Marc Chagall, the famous painter, created an image of three individual creatures at the table portrayed as angels with large but delicate-looking wings gathered to break bread. It's a powerful image of a meal of miracles and messengers.

But what if Abraham had ignored them? What if Abraham had not welcomed them into his midst. Would he have missed the message? Would he have missed the miracle? But he didn't. He invited them into his home and his life. He welcomed them at his table and Sarah, while hovering in the background maybe out of sight, when she hears the message of the messengers, she did what any normal woman at her age and stage of life would do--she laughed. We don't know if it was nervous or hysterical. But she laughed, no doubt. But then she is challenged by God to consider the power of possibility and she learns that the seemingly impossible is about to become possible. In the end whether it was a visit or a vision, it is a story of hope and of a promise fulfilled.

I think there are moments in our own lives when we look back and we realize how the Spirit has moved among us, when people have become messengers of hope and new possibilities. Consider moments in your own lives that presented you with the most unexpected outcomes. You went somewhere on a whim and ended up meeting the person you married. You talked to someone and heard about a job you would have never known about. Seemingly chance encounters bring with them powerful moments of change and new possibilities. But they only happen when we are open to them.

On NPR not long ago I heard a story that related to this and it moved me deeply. It reflected a most unexpected encounter that changed lives through the gift of hospitality. Rabbi Weisser spoke on a program

called "Snap Judgment" about what happened when he and his family moved from New York City to Lincoln, Nebraska, so that he could serve at a temple. On the day they moved in, they got a threatening phone call. The voice said they would be sorry they had ever moved in. So he called the police, and when the police came they listened well and said they knew it was probably Larry Trapp, a white supremacist who lived in the area. They offered some solemn advice. Have your children take different routes home from school, and other things that made him uncomfortable. Not long afterwards, they received a package of 50 or 60 items of hate mail about the KKK and other groups. At that point, Rabbi Weisser said he had had enough and he decided to contact the man by phone. He said if we really couldn't talk and it didn't make a difference, he would simply tell him to leave my family alone. But Larry didn't answer. Instead he got an answering machine filled with hate towards all kinds of ethnic groups and changing messages.

But something made Rabbi Weiser continue to call. On these occasions he would leave messages that he called "love notes" every week. Then finally one day Larry answered the phone and he began yelling and screaming and he said, "What do you want? Leave me alone!" And Rabbi Weiser said, "I heard you use a wheelchair because you lost your legs to diabetes that you have had since you were a child. I wonder, do you want a ride to the grocery store?" There was long silence. Then Larry said, "No, I got that covered." And the call ended.

Rabbi Weiser continued to call every Thursday afternoon and left a message. Then one Saturday night, the phone rang at the Rabbi's house. "Is this the Rabbi?" the voice said and Rabbi Weisser said, "Yes. Is this Larry Trapp?" and he said, "Yes." "What can I do for you?" said the Rabbi. "Can you come and talk to me? I wanna get out of what I'm doing." The Rabbi was shocked and said, "Yes." Then he called a friend and told him, "If I don't call you by midnight, call the police." Then he told his son that they were going to bring dinner to Larry's house and break bread with him. His son was terrified and said, "You can't go. He's a Nazi. When he says he wants you over for dinner, he means it literally."

My guess is this is when the Rabbi laughed like Sarah. But he went anyway, taking his wife, Julie, with him. When they arrived at the house, Larry opened the door. He was sitting there in his wheelchair with a rifle and a pistol hanging on each side. The Rabbi said, "Julie and I were sure this was it. But instead, Larry reached out and took my hand and began to cry." "Help me," he said, "I've been doing this so long I don't know how to get out of it." Then he took off two rings with Nazi symbols and gave them to the Rabbi and said, "Take them away. They've caused me nothing but trouble all my life."

They talked for a long time that night and Larry shared about his childhood. He had a father who had nothing good to say to him and beat him regularly. The Rabbi said, "I realized Larry had spent his childhood trying to please his father. When he grew up he became the Grand Dragon of Nebraska and even long after his father was gone, he was still trying to please him. Before we left, Larry said, 'Take away all the literature and everything else related to it and get it out of my house.'" In the days that followed, Larry and Julie and Rabbi Weiser kept meeting. He said, "We became more than acquaintances, we became friends. And then we began to notice that Larry wasn't doing well. He was having kidney troubles. And my wife said, 'We need to move him in with us. He has no one else to take care of him.' And so he moved into my daughter's room and my wife left her job to care for him."

Soon afterwards Larry told me he wanted to become Jewish. "Larry," I said, "you grew up Catholic. Go back to the church." "No," he said, "I had a miracle in my life and it was Judaism. I want to become a Jew." "I admit," the Rabbi said, "I tried to palm him off on my Christian clergy friends, but to no avail." So he studied Judaism. He wanted to become a Jew and we had a conversion ceremony. He came to temple every week and he continued to live with us for nine months and he became like family. You know, every family has someone who is a little like the crazy uncle. He had become that guy. Then in the middle of the night, he died. His funeral was at the temple and many, many people came. We felt like a member of our family had died and we grieved.

The fact is Larry died a better man than he lived much of his life. During those nine months it was like he had gone through the process of birth again and became a new person. You see, he had spent the last months of his life making amends with people...calling people and apologizing...he spoke at the high school about racism. And he worked with many people.¹

Rabbi Weisser's story shares pain and sorrow and the laugh of disbelief mingled with hope and love, of what was impossible becoming possible--all because of the act of hospitality. I think sometimes we only think of miracles as something that undermines nature--a kind of magical event. But miracles can also be unexpected transformations, amazing reconciliations.

I think of a story shared by CNN this week about two protest groups marching in Dallas. The officials wanted to keep them apart because they wanted to keep the peace, thinking that their issues were diametrically opposed. But something spoke to the leaders. After a while each group sent someone to meet in the middle of the street to talk. And then more of them began crossing the street. And then they talked and they prayed and they cried and they hugged for they realized they had more in common than they had ever been aware of. I think they found the miracle of common ground.

These are difficult times and it's tempting just to hunker down and hide and build walls of safety. But I think now more than ever we have to be open to and offer welcome and hospitality, to recognize that messengers walk among us offering unexpected outcomes and miracles if we keep our hearts and our minds open. When we do, there are opportunities for transformation and peace and hope. These things are rooted in God's call to hospitality and welcome, the willingness to expect the unexpected. As people of faith, may we work and serve so that it always may be so. Amen.

¹ From the radio show Snap Judgment, the episode called The Rabbi and the KKK, Hosted by Glynn Washington as shared on NPR.