

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 29 August 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

The lectionary is certainly helpful in encouraging us in our exploration of our annual theme of Hospitality which we began on Saint James Day.

The Epistle to the Hebrews today is reminding us once again of the hospitality of Abraham under the oaks at Mamre. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Abraham and Sarah scrambled about their tents to provide bread and wine and meat for the passing strangers – strangers who turned out to be angels, messengers from God to assure them of the truth of God’s promises, that despite all common sense they would soon have a child and begin the line which would generate progeny more numerous than the sands of the seashore or the stars in the sky.

When we think about hospitality, what it can mean in our lives here at Saint James and our lives in our neighborhoods and workplaces, it is useful to think about Abraham and Sarah. Let us imagine ourselves out in the hot and dusty world of the Near East. We are traveling with camels and donkeys, sheep and goats, and assorted other animals, with relatives and herders and various slaves. It is a struggle to keep all of us fed and watered in this dry countryside, but we are managing well, with skill, determination, and trust in God, who led us out here, away from our comfortable home in Ur. Here we are at Mamre, where the oaks and terebinths indicate reliable water for us and our animals – and where two trade routes cross so that we might have opportunity to trade for other necessities.

This is a good place to be, a place for rest and prayer. And here come some visitors. They have an aura of importance about them, which certainly helps prompt our welcome.

But more important than that, they seem to be on their own, without flocks or herds or a caravan of supplies. Survival out here is helped by the water, but more is needed. So we would surely offer hospitality to anyone who came by. We understand that essential rule of nomadic people, that the stranger is welcomed to food and drink and shelter – because that is the only way human beings can survive in such an inhospitable environment.

Here in 21st century Oregon, if someone stops by one of our houses, we usually have something in the cupboard or the refrigerator to offer. It is relatively easy to be generous. Not so out in the wilderness.

There is water at Mamre, so that is not hard. But any wine or grain we have has been carried a long way, is part of a precious store. Sarah cooks them some sort of bread or cake – not from a mix, but probably beginning by grinding the grain, mixing ingredients, building a fire, and so on. Then the centerpiece of such generous welcome tends to be the meat – not grabbed from the freezer and thawed in the microwave. An animal is chosen from the herd, killed, drained of blood, butchered, and then cooked. This is a lot of work! And this is the hospitality they freely offered to these people they had never met, setting an example for all time of ‘showing hospitality to strangers and thus entertaining angels unaware.’

I believe that whenever we truly welcome strangers into our lives, into our communities, we are entertaining angels, messengers of God. I do not mean that each one will have a specific message as life changing as “Your elderly wife will have a baby next year”! I mean that at each such encounter, in which we open ourselves to the new person, the stranger, we open ourselves up to whatever God is wanting to do in our lives, whatever God is wanting to say to us at that particular time.

The logical corollary to this is that whenever we ignore the stranger, neglect to provide welcome and hospitality, we are likely to be missing part of the blessing that God has for us. Fundamentally, I believe that we should welcome the stranger because that is how we are meant to live, as individual representatives of the infinite love of God for each individual. But, selfishly, we do not want to miss out on any gift that God may have to offer us!

Sometimes thinking about that beautiful scene under the oaks at Mamre makes me feel rather ungenerous. How easy it is for us to simply walk someone down to coffee hour compared to all that time and effort and personal cost Sarah and Abraham put into welcoming their strangers. But I do not believe that is how God sees it. Our efforts may not involve all of the mess and sacrifice of ancient nomads, but they often involve rising about our own shyness, or personal pain that would keep us alone. Whatever we may be feeling at any given time, welcoming people is always an opportunity to be part of God’s blessing to the world.

As I have mentioned before, hospitality is a way of living. It encompasses all our interactions. Perhaps we start by taking the visitor to coffee hour, showing the new family to the nursery or Sunday School, conversing with the person off on his own, helping people with the books in worship. But as we look at each unknown person as a messenger from God, as a child of God to whom we are privileged to show God’s love, this affects how we drive our cars. It affects the courtesy and concern we show to clerks and wait staff, to the letter carrier and the meter reader. It affects how we interact with a new neighbor and to the one who has always lived down the street but with whom we have never had a conversation. It affects how we relate to the person at the next desk, to our bosses, to our subordinates.

It is a valuable spiritual exercise to learn to see each person we encounter as an angel, a messenger sent by God to give us the opportunity to live into the love we have been promised.

The old translation of the line from Hebrews says, “entertained angels unaware.” The translation we heard today is of course correct that this means “entertained angels without knowing it.” But I like to think that often the angels themselves are unaware. Clearly Abraham and Sarah’s angels knew exactly what they were about. But I think very few people go about with the awareness that they may be vehicles of God’s grace in the lives of everyone they encounter. God may be offering hope or promise or encouragement or a new direction through any one of us. And we may never know. We do not need to know. We simply need to accept the

opportunity to embrace each opportunity for interaction with gratitude and an open heart, to meet angels and to be angels.

It would, of course, be wrong to speak of hospitality today without mentioning the wedding banquet passage from Luke. Jesus often speaks of hospitality, of how we are welcoming one another in the world. In this passage, he seems to be making two major points that we need to bear in mind in our year of hospitality.

First, he focuses on our role as guests. We should always be humble guests, guests who know that we are not the most important people in the world, that everything does not revolve around us. This awareness of our own reality, as one among that vast multitude of God's beloved creatures, not only helps avoid the embarrassment Jesus speaks of, but also helps us to be more fully aware of others, their needs, their desires, their importance.

Second, he focuses on our role as hosts. Our hospitality is a reflection of divine hospitality. As God loves everyone and invites everyone into the Kingdom, so are we meant to be open, generous and welcoming to everyone – especially to all the people who may not often find welcome.

It is my hope that during the course of this Year of Hospitality we will not only find many ways to make our community more welcoming to everyone and our parish more a center of welcome in Tigard, but also find ourselves all becoming more welcoming presences wherever we are in our day-to-day lives.

The reading from Hebrews begins, "Let mutual love continue." Indeed – let it continue and grow and thrive among us, so that everyone we encounter may know themselves welcome in the world as they are touched by the all-embracing love of God.