

Come to Dinner

Gen 18: 1-10a, Luke 10: 38-42

July 21, 2019

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Gen 18: 1-10a

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. 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. 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.

Lk 10: 38-42

Now as they went on their way, he 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 him 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."

It had all started off so simply. Three strangers arrive, and Abraham is a generous, gracious host. Following the ancient law of the desert, he shared shelter, food and drink. He welcomed the travelers, "Have a little water, wash your feet and rest yourselves in the shade from the heat of the day." Perhaps it was because of the searing heat, or because the men appeared quite worn out from their journey, Abraham offered even more hospitality. Sarah and their servants joined in offering a gracious welcome, so that soon the simple sharing of water and shade had become an extravagant banquet of freshly baked bread, roasted meat and cheese.

Gifts of hospitality to welcome three hot, tired, thirsty and hungry travelers were freely offered and graciously accepted. Abraham and Sarah surely must have felt that the men would enjoy and benefit from their kindness, say thank you, and then continue on down the road. They never would have expected that what began as simple hospitality would become an announcement that they, older and childless, would soon have a son. Simple hospitality, extravagant hospitality, and a blessing for a future that changed everything, that changed the world.

It had all started off so simply. A good friend, Jesus, had come to visit the two sisters, Mary and Martha. They were excited to see him, and to spend time catching up with one another as good friends do, and they were also eager to hear his new teachings. Martha wanted to be sure that Jesus was welcomed, that he was comfortable, fed and given something to drink. She was frustrated that her sister did not also offer even the simplest hospitality but continued to sit and listen to him. But Jesus surprised 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.”

Jesus’ words were not a rejection of Martha’s friendship and hospitality but rather a resetting of priorities and an invitation of radical hospitality for both sisters to come sit with Jesus and learn from him. In an era and society when it would not have been appropriate for women---for all who were inferior and marginalized---to sit and learn as a religious disciple, Jesus took simple hospitality to a radical hospitality that seeks opportunity and justice for all who face bias and inequity. Simple hospitality, extravagant hospitality, and a blessing of transformation that changed everything, that changed the world.

From the faithful and generous lives of Abraham and Sarah, from the wisdom and lessons Martha and Mary learned from Jesus’ teachings, we see the truth of Ethics Professor Christine Pohl’s words, “A life of hospitality begins in worship, with a recognition of God’s grace and generosity. Hospitality is not first a duty and a responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God’s love and welcome to us.”

Beyond worship, there is another place where we know God is found. John Neafsey, in his book *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, says that “the most important place to hear God’s voice is in the cry of the poor. Finding God among the poor is perhaps not as easy as in the beauty of nature or the peace of worship. But finding God among the poor is certain: for we know that God is always alive in the struggle for justice. We know that God lives among the marginalized, that God fights for the poor and upholds the weak. Go and be among the poor, not to fix them, but merely to listen. To abide with one another. To build community. Keep your heart open, and you will hear God’s voice there.”

Jesus taught that acts of hospitality are actually a clear measure of a person's relationship and heart with God: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

It all started off so simply with a sandwich and a few moments of conversation, just simple gestures. In 1982, Karen Olson was hurrying on her way to a New York City business meeting. On impulse, or in better words, on a nod from God, Karen stopped outside Grand Central Terminal to buy a sandwich for a homeless woman she had seen many times before. As Karen handed the woman the sandwich and started to walk away, the woman held onto her hand to initiate conversation. Realizing that the homeless woman wanted more than food, that she wanted human interaction, Karen offered the hospitality of presence and listening. She learned that the woman's name was Millie, that she had once been married and had two children. Through the conversation, Karen learned how homelessness can cause profound feelings of diminished self-worth and disconnection from society. The encounter motivated her and her sons to begin handing out bagged lunches to homeless people in the city.

They soon learned that homelessness also impacted many persons in her own home community in New Jersey, and she was surprised by the large proportion of children in the homeless population. She decided to leave her marketing career and instead focus on helping families in need. She organized a conference of 200 people from the local religious and service

communities and brought their attention to the high incidence of homelessness among families in the county. Through subsequent meetings, the new group realized that traditional shelters could not adequately address the challenges homeless families faced, but that the community itself did have the services and resources necessary to move families from homelessness to sustainable independence. Volunteers could use their skills, knowledge, and compassion to help their homeless neighbors find employment, reconnect with society, and restore their dignity.

She approached the religious community. Congregations offered hospitality space within their buildings. The YMCA provided showers and a family Day Center. A car dealer discounted a van. The first interfaith hospitality network opened in October 1986. As word spread, more New Jersey congregations formed a second network. Other congregations were inspired to develop similar programs. In 1988, only a few years after a sandwich and conversation was offered to Millie, the Interfaith Hospitality Network brought the program nationwide. In addition to shelter, meals, housing, and job-seeking support, affiliates began developing programs for transitional housing, sustainability, childcare, and homelessness prevention.

In 2003 the National Interfaith Hospitality Network was renamed Family Promise, to better reflect the broad range of programs and vision of ending family homelessness. The name refers to the promise, in the sense of commitment, which communities make to families in need. But it also refers to the promise, the potential, inherent in every family. Family Promise has truly grown to represent a national movement that believes we can address family homelessness—right here in our own communities. It had all started off so simply. Simple hospitality, extravagant hospitality, and a blessing of hope and community that changed everything, that changed the world.

Hospitality involves the obvious: offering food, drink and shelter to the stranger in need. By faith however, hospitality is a much richer, larger concept. Hospitality is an attitude, a disposition of the heart, out of which such generous actions naturally flow.

A few years ago the house next to our church became available, and with a vague, yet hopeful sense of purpose, the Dubben House was purchased knowing it could be of some use. That unknown use became clear when Barbara Daley read an article in the newspaper about a Family Promise success story. A mother and her 4 sons were graduating out of the program and into a home of their own. One of the sons who was interviewed shared his thoughts on having been fed and welcomed by host churches. He said, “When we get out and have an apartment I want to come back and cook dinner for them as they did for us.”

Different words, but the same message as Jesus taught. “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

A simple newspaper article opened the way to Smith Church becoming one of the 13 area host churches for the Concord office of Family Promise. In September it will be 4 years since the first families were guests at the Dubben House, and over that time 40 members and friends of Smith Church have extended gracious hospitality to almost 30 families, and we have had our own graduation success story in addition to another family in the program who just found an apartment. Simple hospitality, generous hospitality, and a blessing for a families in need that changes everything, that changes the world. Amen.