

Genesis 18:1-8  
Hebrews 13:2  
The Sacred Art of Hospitality  
WRCoB 9.15.19

Rev. Fred Craddock tells the story of preaching a revival  
In a big church in Atlanta.

He preached four nights  
And every night the place was packed.

As part of every service the host pastor  
Would invite the congregation  
To greet each other in Christian love.

Craddock said you never saw such a thing.

People going up and down the aisles  
Kissing, hugging and carrying on.

He said four night of that.

*The last night, he and his wife took me and my wife out to coffee. He said, "Did you ever see such a family church? Did you ever see such love in your life in a church?"*

*My wife said, "Yeah, well, yeah, I have." He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "I was there all four services, and nobody ever spoke to me."*

*And do you know what he said? He said, "Well, that's because they didn't know who you were."*

I've been to that kind of church.

Judith and I attended a church service  
Where not one person reached out to welcome us.

Yet they were warm and friendly to each other.

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Today I want to talk about the sacred art of hospitality  
Or maybe the "lost" art of hospitality.

The society in which we live  
Is no longer hospitable to the stranger in our midst.

We tend to look at them with suspicion and distrust.

Whether it be the person knocking at our front door  
A visitor to our church  
Or a refugee to our country.

Most of us would never respond to strangers  
The way Abraham did in our Scripture Lesson.

But that hasn't always been the case.

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During the Great Depression in the 30s  
Many people became homeless  
And wandered the countryside in search of work.

It wasn't uncommon for a stranger  
To come and knock on your door.

They'd ask if there was something to do  
Chop a load of wood, clean out a calf pen  
Something for a bite to eat.

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It also wasn't too many years ago  
That if a stranger came to church

They never, ever went away  
Without an invitation from someone to Sunday dinner.

It was part and parcel of church hospitality.

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In Old Testament times  
People treated guests, whether strangers, or the invited  
With honor and respect.

The host fed the visitors' animals  
Water to quench the thirst and to wash feet  
Food to eat and a place to rest.

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The NT also assumed the sacred art of hospitality!

Jesus and his followers depended on people's hospitality  
As they went from village to village  
Throughout Galilee.

Many of Jesus' teaching moments came  
As he and his disciples sat around a table  
As strangers and guests.

When Jesus sent out the seventy . . .

**Luke 9:3-5 (NIV) He told them: “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. <sup>4</sup> Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. <sup>5</sup> If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”**

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Today’s lesson takes place in Mamre near the town Hebron  
At the home of Abraham and Sarah.

It was in the heat of the day.

Abraham had just finished eating his dinner.

He wakes up from his after-dinner nap  
When three strangers show up.

Instead of entering the tent and closing the flap

Instead of telling them  
He already had a vacuum cleaner  
Already had plenty of magazine subscriptions  
Already had a church he attended

Instead of turning them away  
He hurriedly got up from the door of his tent

Quickly went out to meet them  
Bowing low to the ground.

**Genesis 18:3-5 (NRSV) He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a**

**little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.**

**5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on . . . .”**

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The three strangers agree.

Abraham runs to tell Sarah that guests have arrived.

He tells her to get this ridiculous amount of flour  
In English terms, 20 quarts of flour  
And prepare to bake some bread!

He then runs to the barn  
And tells his hired man to select a nice, fat calf  
And orders him to butcher it.

Abraham brings the three an appetizer  
Some cheese and milk to tide them over.

When the bread and meat are prepared  
Abraham brings it out to them  
And sets it before them . . .  
The finest they have to offer.

Meanwhile he stands apart from them like a waiter  
And watches to make sure they are adequately cared for.

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Little did Abraham realize, then  
That in his duty of practicing hospitality  
He really was entertaining angels!

If we were to read on we'd discover  
That after the strangers finished their hearty meal  
The Lord informed Abraham of a coming miracle.

That his wife, Sarah, age ninety  
And way beyond her child-bearing years  
Would bear a son the following year!

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Abraham's act of hospitality  
Seems rather extraordinary, doesn't it?

And yet, in biblical times  
As well as in certain regions of the world today

Hospitality ranks extremely high in cultural expectations.

In Nigeria, when you go to someone's home  
They will ask if they can bring water to drink.

What they really mean is  
They're not only going to bring you a cup of cool water

They've just sent one of their kids out back to kill a chicken.

What they really mean is  
The mother of the house  
Is stirring the cooking fires  
To put on water to boil rice

What they really mean is  
Be prepared to eat a feast  
The best their humble home can provide!

Zenodochy is the technical term for it . . .  
The hospitality towards strangers.

We can talk about this on several different levels  
Our own personal hospitality to strangers  
Our church's response to first-time visitors  
Our country's response to refugees.

Today I want to focus on church hospitality.

Some churches are better at it than others.

Like the opening illustration  
Almost all churches are warm and friendly  
Towards their own.

But how are they towards first-time visitors?

How are they when people come who not like them . . .  
People who look different . . .  
Speak different . . .  
Dress different?

How are these churches then?

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How would you rank West Richmond  
Are we warm, welcoming and hospitable?

How are we when they are no longer strangers?

When they have come more than once or twice  
When they are what we might call "new attendees?"

Do we seek them out  
And include them in other aspects of church life?

Church volleyball for sure.

But how about inviting them into our homes and our lives?

Do we seek to include them  
Beyond the initial act of hospitality?

Do they become an integral part of our community?

Do we include them in decision-making?

If not, we have work to do.

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Welcoming the stranger has become a lost art.

And in a society with tremendous feelings of isolation  
The church needs take the lead on this  
And be the welcoming presence to the stranger.

Jesus once said, “For I was a stranger and you welcomed me”

St Benedict in his book, *The Rule of Benedict* writes “all  
guests who arrive should be received as if they were Christ.”

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Let me share one final story from Rev. Craddock.

In the early years of his ministry  
He pastored a little country church  
In the hills of Tennessee.

It was there in that area  
That they built the Oak Ridge atomic power plant.

And during the time of the construction  
Thousands of outsiders came to find work.

Rev. Craddock was a young pastor then  
And he called a congregational council meeting.

And he said to the congregation, *“Now we need to launch a calling campaign and an invitational campaign in all those trailer parks to invite those people to church.*

*“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think they’d fit in here,” said one of them. “Well, we ought to invite them, make them feel at home,” I said.*

Rev. Craddock said they argued until the time ran out.

It was decided they’d vote on the proposal  
The following Sunday after church service.

After church the next week, one of the members started *“I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” Someone else said, “I second that.”*

They voted. The motion passed.

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Years and years later  
Following his retirement  
Craddock and his wife returned.

They wanted to find that little, country church.

They found it.

It looked different.

The parking lot was full.

Out in front was this huge, electronic sign.

It read, *Barbecue, all you can eat!*

The church was now a restaurant!

They went in.

All kinds of people were sitting around them

Eating barbecued pork, chicken and ribs.

All kinds of people were there

Insiders and outsiders

In-laws and out-laws

Blacks and whites

Rich and poor!

There was warmth and there was fellowship.

Craddock turned to his wife and said, *“It’s a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise, these people couldn’t be in here.”*

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Three strangers entered Abraham’s sanctuary

Under the oaks of Mamre.

And he hosted them as if they were angels.

The love of Christ compels us to do the same.