

Genesis 18:1-8
Hebrews 13:2
The Sacred Art of Hospitality
WRCoB 7.9.23

The late 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.

Every service included an invitation
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 it was four nights 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."

Have you ever been to a church like that? I have.

I want to spend some time over the summer
Talking about the sacred art of hospitality
Or should I say
The “lost” art of hospitality.

Today’s society no longer seems hospitable
To the stranger in our midst.

We look at them with suspicion and distrust.

Whether it is a person knocking at the door to our home
Or a first-time visitor to our church
Or a refugee to our country.

Strangers make us feel uncomfortable.

But how do you think the stranger feels?

We certainly would never respond
The way Abraham and Sarah did in today’s Scripture?

But that hasn’t always been the case.

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During the Great Depression in the 30s
Many people were homeless
Wandering 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.

My dad remembers that grandpa never turned anyone away.

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.

Those days seem mostly gone.

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In Old Testament times, people treated guests
Whether strangers, or invited guests
With honor and respect.

The host cared for the physical needs of both
The visitors and the visitors' animals.

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In the NT, people continued to practice hospitality!

Jesus and his followers depended on it
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. ⁴ Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. ⁵ If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

How would they have managed in today’s society?

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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 middle of the day.

Abraham awoke from his after-dinner nap
When three strangers showed up.

Instead of entering the tent and closing the flap

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

Already had tree service, new roof, siding, windows
And lawn care.

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

He quickly went out to meet them, bowing low to the ground

Genesis 18:3-5 NRSV

³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ 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—since you have come to your servant.”

Abraham runs to tell Sarah that they have guests

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.

And then Abraham brings them an appetizer
Some cheese and milk to tide them over.

When the bread and meat were prepared
Abraham brings it out to them
And sets it before them.

And then stands apart like a waiter
Making sure they are adequately cared for.

Hospitality? To the nth degree!

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Little did Abraham realize
That in practicing hospitality
He 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!

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

Maybe, even over the top.

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.

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!

Why? Because they are honored for you as their guest.

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

Zenodochy can be talked about on several different levels.

Our own personal hospitality to strangers
Our church's response to strangers
Our country's response to strangers.

This summer, we will discuss all three.

What motivates me to discuss these topics
Are recent events that took place
In the life of our congregation.

I believe we can do with some evaluation.

Some churches are really good at hospitality.
Others, not so good.

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

But how are those churches at receiving visitors?

How are they when people come
Who look different, speak different, or dress different?

How welcoming are they?

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How would you rank West Richmond?

Are we warm, welcoming and hospitable?

How are we when first-time visitors
Are no longer strangers?

When they are what we call “new friends?”

Do we include them in other aspects of church life?
Invite them into our homes and into our lives?
Integrate them into our community?

If not, we need to ask why.

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Welcoming the stranger is a lost art.

The church is the answer to this question

*How do we heal a society filled with feelings of
Isolation, depression, anxiety, and loneliness*

It is Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church
That brings peace and belonging to a fractured soul.

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The over-arching theme in our summer series is this

*Welcome a Stranger, Welcome Christ
“for I was a stranger and you welcomed me”
(Mt. 25:31-46)*

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Let me share one final story from Rev. Craddock.

In his early years Craddock pastored a little country church
In the hills of Tennessee

It was in the area where they were building
The Oak Ridge atomic power plant.

During construction of the power plant
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.*

They argued until the time ran out.
And decided to vote on the proposal
The following Sunday after church service.

After church the following 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 later, following his retirement
Craddock and his wife went to find the country church.

They found it.

The parking lot was full of cars

Out in front of the church

Was a huge, electronic sign that read
Barbecue, all you can eat!

The church was now a restaurant!

They went in.

All kinds of people were sitting around

Eating barbecued pork, chicken and ribs.

All kinds of people

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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Think about it, welcome a stranger, welcome Christ.

Revelation 3:20 NRSV Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me