

Sermon
Southwest Conference Annual Meeting
March 28, 2014
Phoenix, AZ

Gen 18:1-8

1 The LORD appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day's heat. 2 He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them and bowed deeply. 3 He said, "Sirs, if you would be so kind, don't just pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and refresh yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me offer you a little bread so you will feel stronger, and after that you may leave your servant and go on your way—since you have visited your servant." They responded, "Fine. Do just as you have said." 6 So Abraham hurried to Sarah at his tent and said, "Hurry! Knead three seahs of the finest flour and make some baked goods!" 7 Abraham ran to the cattle, took a healthy young calf, and gave it to a young servant, who prepared it quickly. 8 Then Abraham took butter, milk, and the calf that had been prepared, put the food in front of them, and stood under the tree near them as they ate.

Rom 15:1-7

1 We who are powerful need to be patient with the weakness of those who don't have power, and not please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please our neighbors for their good in order to build them up. 3 Christ didn't please himself, but, as it is written, The insults of those who insulted you fell on me. 4 Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. 6 That way you

can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice. 7 So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory.

“So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God’s glory.”

As I was preparing this sermon, there were three images I couldn’t keep out of my head. Two were cartoons about the death last week of Fred Phelps—the infamous preacher whose family showed up everywhere with signs proclaiming “GOD HATES FAGS.” (It’s difficult even for me to speak those words.) Both cartoons imagine Phelps at heaven’s gate, but with two different outcomes. In the first, St. Peter hands Phelps a paintbrush and a bucket of paint and orders him to cross out the word “HATES” with “MAKES.” “God MAKES fags.” “After you’ve finished,” Peter says, “then we can talk.” Easy enough, except the signs stretch up a long hill towards infinity.

The second cartoonist imagines Phelps standing before a very friendly St. Peter. Next to Peter are two saints with wings and halos—both very pious looking gay men. “Here are your new roommates,” says Peter, “Adam and Steve!”

I think the first cartoonist might have been a Roman Catholic: God will eventually welcome Fred, but there's purgatory first. He has a lot of sin to atone for. That's one way to get to heaven. The second is very UCC: "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on God's journey, you're welcome here." You're welcome here! Except so is everyone else, and Fred is going to have to live with that. Either way, there's a learning curve.

The third image is an icon. For centuries, Christians have interpreted the story of Abraham and Sarah and the three visitors as an encounter with the Trinity. There are three strangers. They're very mysterious. One traditional icon depicts the three sitting under the oaks of Mamre at a table covered with food. Abraham and Sarah are absent. The icon is called "Troika"—Greek for "Trinity." But another, more ancient version of the icon shows the same scene but with Sarah and Abraham serving the three strangers. This is the icon at the front door of my home. The title, in Greek, is "Philoxenia"—the Greek word for hospitality, which translated literally means "Love for the Stranger."

So: radical hospitality. Extravagant welcome. Words I've heard in a hundred sermons, speeches, conversations over the past 20 years.

But how “radical” is our hospitality? How “extravagant” is our welcome?

For some of us, the depth of our welcome is a matter of life and death. Three strangers arrived out of the desert. If Abraham and Sarah had turned them away, that could have been a death sentence. The moral code of the ancient Near East imposed an obligation on the host: following this code, Abraham rushes out of his tent and “bows deeply.” That probably means more than a nod of the head: it’s more likely Abraham prostrated him on the ground and kissed the feet of his guests. Then a truly extravagant feast is prepared as if they were royalty. There is drink for their thirst, food for their hunger.

The strangers, of course, are divine messengers. The story makes no distinction between them and God: “The LORD appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day's heat. He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him.” This dance between the one and the three continues throughout the story. It’s no wonder our ancestors in faith came to believe this story prefigured the doctrine of the Trinity. It was God coming out of the desert, tired, thirsty, and hungry.

The presence of God in the stranger became the great theme of Jewish and Christian ethics. It runs like a golden thread through the Talmud and the New Testament. In the letter to the Hebrews: "Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it."

So, how radical is my hospitality? How extravagant my welcome? How do I set boundaries? Can I set any boundaries? And how ... someone please tell me ... how can I see the presence of God in Fred Phelps? How can I even imagine a God whose arms are open in a welcoming embrace to one whose life was so disfigured by hate?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But all I know is that I have been the stranger—hungry and thirsty and wandering through the desert. My life has been saved again and again by a God who in Jesus Christ has welcomed me with open arms. The grace that God has poured out on me I cannot possibly deny to another.

Still, I think "extravagant welcome" is an impossible ethic if it all depends on me. Fortunately, I'm not the host of this party. Jesus is the host, and we know this is true because each of us in this church has at one time or another stumbled into his embrace—tired, hungry,

thirsty. And so in Paul's words we "welcome each other in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory."