

“When Our Paths Cross”

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Genesis 18:1-8

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.

Luke 14:1, 7-14a

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ... When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...

We hear this parable fairly often in church. Yet, by the time the story’s ended, I may have forgotten *why* Jesus told this story.

A houseful of people are ready to sit down to a meal and everyone’s jostling for position. It’s Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma’s and everyone wants to sit near the food or by Grandpa or a favorite cousin. No one wants to sit by the baby – she throws things – or Uncle Charlie – who spits food as he talks – or by the kitchen door – ‘cause then you have to keep getting up to get more gravy.

Jesus reminds everyone that there’s more to life than fussing over one’s own position. That looking out for number one can lead to trouble.

Years ago, my now former husband asked why I always sat at the head of the table. I was surprised. I sat at the seat closest to the kitchen! Sometimes we do things for the right reasons, but when we don’t include other people in it – when we don’t make room for their ideas or share ours, we can encounter the same awkwardness as the Pharisee’s dinner companions.

Today we talk about hospitality. I used to assume hospitality was about having guests over and making sure everybody had a good time. I’d envy people who could do this because I’m hopeless at it.

Then ten or twelve years ago, I learned that hospitality is something quite different. A person can be hospitable and never have people over, never bring cookies to a church function. Hospitality is about creating sacred space where people can be themselves. It's about mutual reverence. And having "an open heart, a stance of availability, and to look for God lurking in every single person who comes through the door."¹ I like that word available. When we practice hospitality we're present, should the other person want our company, but we don't assume. We're ready to talk, but also prepared to give them space.

When we were visiting churches after moving to Wisconsin, we'd talk about the experience on the way home. One thing that'd come up was the Passing of the Peace. Sometimes, we felt like fresh meat in a room full of well-meaning, but hungry church members. I can't tell you how many times I've heard this from people.

Hospitality has no selfish motivations. Our agenda doesn't let us be fully present and available. Only when we accept people just as they are in that moment are we practicing hospitality. How often do we hear or ask, however well-meaning, "Are you thinking about having another child?" or "Will you be going back to work soon?" or ... Really, what business is it of ours? Don Greer shared a story this summer about a conversation he had. After he and this other man had been talking a while. After it came out that Don is a clergyman, he asked what it would take for this man to go to church. "That'll never happen." Why not? This man and his partner have been together for years. Every December, she makes sure they and the kids all go to church on Christmas Eve. And every year, the man said with tears in his eyes, the people there ask, "When are you going to get married?"

In the time of Abraham, life was hostile outside the cities. Hospitality meant safety. People expected to take in and feed travelers, and to receive the same in turn. Not to share what you had with a stranger could be deadly. Still, people didn't always do it. Otherwise, Jesus' story about the Good, but totally Unacceptable Samaritan would never have caught on. People could see themselves and their neighbors in each of the characters.

Although it's really nothing new, we live in a time when strangers – next door or around the world – can be frightening. Hospitality is radical and potentially scary. Yet we need it. Isolation leads to fear and hostility. That fear is a thief, stealing our peace of mind and hijacking relationships. When we try to remove the threats, we close ourselves in a bubble of false security.

Rather than living in bunkers of solitude, Jesus calls us to engage with each other and to love our neighbors. Hospitality is *how* we live that call. The people we meet in our lives everyday – at home and at work, yes, but also at the coffee shop or walking across a parking lot – are not incidental to our lives. They are our neighbors. We ignore them at our peril, for it's through them that we can experience the holy.

Abraham's and the Samaritan stories are about providing a safe space in a hostile world. Through our actions we create sacred space. Building on that, hospitality accepts the other person as they are – without judgment, without expectation. Sometimes we think acceptance and tolerance are the same thing, but it's not. When you know someone's simply tolerating your beliefs or your way of living, how do you feel?

Let me share Catherine's story. This young person had never felt accepted. You went to school with someone like her. Maybe she wore ill-fitting hand-me-downs; or her breath smelled

different; maybe she was clumsier than the other kids. We can be sure that Catherine had many tough nights growing up, wondering if she mattered or if people would ever really hear her.

One terrible night, Catherine called Mary Cummings. She called Mary because once, when Catherine had dropped her books and everything else she was carrying, Mary stopped and helped. Mary extended the simplest of courtesies. She looked into those eyes that had known only contempt, said a few words and helped in an awkward moment. By doing this, Mary showed Catherine that she could be counted on to care. On that night when Catherine truly didn't know if she wanted to see another day, she called Mary.²

When we feel accepted, even if it's only by one person, we can bear ever so much more.

Hospitality is one part of a balanced life. Although the balance is different for each person, it includes three circles of connection – time alone for connecting with ourselves, time with the ones who share our life, and time with everyone else, especially those we're not comfortable with including strangers. Each of these circles – in different ways – can draw us closer to God and to the persons God intends us to be. Whether we're introverted or extroverted, fun-loving or serious, none is optional for a life of wholeness. When your life feels out of balance, you might notice how well you're making time for these concentric circles.

Solitude, community and hospitality are all essential for our personal lives as well as our life as a church. For Wausau: First to be the church God needs us to be, we each need to make time for solitude – meditation, prayer and listening for God as Spirit's guidance. We need to come together as a faith community – in Sunday school and small groups, in ministry teams, and in worship. And we need to stretch ourselves to practice hospitality – saying hi to the folks in the neighborhood that we might otherwise walk past, talking with person across the counter from us or who approaches us for help. We need to work at accepting without judgment every one of God's other children. I'm not saying it's easy. But even if we only do it for ourselves, to be whole as God intends us to be whole, we need to muster the courage and do it.

So, hospitality is about opening ourselves to the holy in each person, accepting and making space for them to be themselves, just as they are. We can't practice hospitality on people we know well – that's called *entertaining*. We have to do it with the people beyond our comfortable circle.

One final story. Lonnie was going through a difficult time. Her daughter'd been in a serious car accident. Relationships at church had gotten ugly. Somehow she'd become a target for gossip. The world didn't feel safe. God seemed nowhere to be found.

She went to visit a friend who was part of a monastic community. She wrote in her journal, "With [them] I was suddenly accepted – accepted during a time when I felt rejected, violated, misunderstood, and betrayed. I remained because [they] loved me without question. I didn't have to prove anything. I didn't have to be smart or witty, deep or cultured, beautiful or young. I just had to let them love me."³

Once again, love seems to be the answer.

¹ Fr. Dan Homan, and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, (Paraclete Press, 2002), xviii.

² *Ibid*, 2.

³ *Ibid*, xxix.