

Come As You Are ... You Belong! 11-15-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Genesis 18:1-10

18The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He 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. ³He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let 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.' ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then 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. ⁹They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' ¹⁰Then 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.

Hebrews 13:1-2

13Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

The importance of showing hospitality to strangers is a prevalent theme in the Bible. It begins right here in the book of *Genesis*.

Abraham is going about his day to day business when he sees three men standing there. As is the custom, he immediately drops everything and

greet them and see to their needs. He wants to make sure they are fed and comfortable and that they experience welcome in his dwelling. There is no indication that he knows who these men are or whether they are important. But they are at his mercy... guests at his house; guests he didn't invite, but nevertheless, they are welcome.

It is only after Abraham and Sarah have treated them with kindness and care that they find out these strangers bring good news. These strangers are no less than messengers, sent from God to tell them that even though they are very old, and even though Sarah is barren, she shall bear a son. The Hebrews passage I read refers to this story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming and providing hospitality to strangers who turn out to be angels in disguise, or people whom God has sent not only to receive, but to give as well.

If you're like me, you may not be quite as gracious and hospitable as Abraham and Sarah. When someone knocks at my door that I don't know, I assume they are trying to sell me something and I don't usually offer them food and a place to rest. But of course times have

changed. A traveler in Abraham and Sarah's day was literally at the mercy of strangers. There were not rest stops and hotels and restaurants and such. People needed each other in ways we may have forgotten in this convenience society we live in. But the truth is, we still need each other and we still need to know the kindness of strangers and we still, for the sake of the gospel and our own souls, need to offer welcome and grace to strangers regardless of what they look like or where they've been or who they're with because you never know when by doing so, you will encounter angels - messengers of God - without even knowing it.

We live in times of great strife and division. People labeling other people and passing judgment accordingly without hearing one another's stories, without acknowledging the humanity of the other, without realizing that we need each other in order to understand the world and the complexities of life more fully, and in order to understand God more faithfully. Instead, we tend to size people up and put them in a category or a box and then dispose of them as we

will. But even if that happens in the wider society, we simply cannot do that in the church and be faithful to the gospel. Just as Jesus welcomed the poor, the outcast, the sinner and the stranger; just as Abraham and Sarah welcomed and cared for strangers in their midst, so we, as Christ's body, must welcome all in this house of God.

The name of my sermon this morning should be very familiar to those of you who attend here regularly, but maybe also to those who drive by this building and see our sign, or those who saw First Christian's ads on the side of buses. Our tag line is, "Come as you are... you belong." And, as I tell people, "we mean it." We don't ask you at the door if you agree with various statements of faith. We don't ask how much money you make or if you have a job. We don't care what you wear or what you've done. Here you will find welcome. Here you will be treated with the respect deserving of a beloved child of God.

As we tried to put these sentiments into the statement of who we are at First Christian Church, we were discussing it at a Board meeting. At first we included language about welcoming all regardless

of race or economic status or gender or sexual orientation and on and on. One member of the board said that the statement sounded more like a poster about non-discrimination in employment. So we struck that language. Now the statement simply says this: "Jesus showed us what unconditional love looks like. We want to follow Jesus' example and love all human beings, no exceptions." No exceptions. You see, when we think we know who God would welcome and who God would not... when we think we have the truth, and don't need to be open to hearing another... when we exclude someone based upon our own prejudices, we also close ourselves to the way God works through the least, the lost, the last, the outcast, the stranger, the enemy. You never know when you may encounter messengers of God without knowing it. That's why we are open to receive any who come through the doors. You are welcome. You belong. And that doesn't mean we all agree. But it does mean I see the face of God in you and respect you and know that you and I can be in fellowship with one another not because of our own goodness, but because of the very unconditional love of God.

Bob Watson shared from his experience of receiving welcome here at a time when tensions were high in the country during the Vietnam War. That was a difficult era both for society and the church. Bob mentioned that Roy Key, who was the minister here at the time, was a pacifist. But Roy Key believed in the vision of a community filled with people of all kinds, who, despite their differences, could experience and share the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that was true for all, no exceptions. The community of Christ could take in conscientious objectors as well as those coming back from serving in the military. Here is a place where people could hold one another in love and fellowship and listen to one another's stories and learn from one another and see through each other's eyes, as together, we try to follow Jesus.

The thing is, as Christians, we don't chose who is welcome. We don't choose who we will be in community with. This may not be a direct quote, but I remember David Digby, who followed Roy Key as minister of this congregation, say, "We don't chose who we welcome.

Just as Christ welcomes us, we welcome others." No exceptions. Because of God's unconditional love toward us, we are able to see another through the eyes of faith, through the eyes of grace and offer hospitality to strangers without asking questions and without standing in judgment.

Bob Watson shared with you the story of a pacifist welcoming him and his family. Well, I want to share a story I heard from Bob about a military officer offering hospitality to pacifists. This story also took place during the Vietnam War when tensions on the campus of Iowa State University were high. The United States had bombed Cambodia and many protesters and spectators had gathered outside the Naval Science building on campus. It was a cold day. And by the end of the day the spectators had packed up and left, leaving only the protestors. It was cold and they had to use sticks and papers to build a fire to keep warm.

Marine Colonial Kluckman was in charge at that time. When it came time for him to lock up the building and go home, he stepped

outside the building to take a count of how many people were there. As he did, the protesters made it known to the Colonial that they had the right to be there. Colonial Kluckman assured them, "Yes, you absolutely have the right to be here, but it is cold," he said, "and I'd like to invite you into the building so you could warm up, but I cannot do that, so I wanted to see how many of you there are so I know how many blankets to bring out here for you."

Colonial Kluckman went back into the building, got 20 Navy blankets and gave them to the group. After leaving the blankets for the protesters, he started to leave. One of the protesters asked why he did that, and why he would trust them, and he said, "We're all Americans."

The next day when Colonial Kluckman returned to the Naval Sciences building, he found the site where the protesters had been was totally cleaned up. The 20 Navy blankets were neatly folded and stacked with a note on top that simply said, "Thank you, sir."

Colonial Kluckman saw that even though the protesters disagreed with him, they were Americans just like he was. But he was also a man of faith. And maybe he had read that Hebrews passage, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

As ones who have received God's unconditional love, we can offer welcome and a place of belonging to all kinds of people... people created by God, loved by God, and for all we know, people who just might be messengers of God sent to proclaim good news of abundant life. So come as you are, you belong. Here you can find welcome. No exceptions. Amen.