

“Gracious Hospitality”
Genesis 18:1-8 and Matthew 25:34-40
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Scripture Readings

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 favour 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.

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,* you did it to me.”

“Gracious Hospitality”

When it comes to hospitality are you a butterscotch, hat, safety or insider person? A lady just had the worst week of her life. The news from the doctor was bad. She was downsized from her job. Her car broke down. She was lonely, afraid and depressed. Suddenly she thought of the sign of a nearby church. If often read, “God loves you!” and “Guests are welcome” She had never been in a church. She kept dismissing the idea of going to church yet it kept coming back to her mind. She could really use some love and welcome. She arrived at the church door and was so nervous she would have turned around and gone home if she could have drove but since her car was not running she walked and needed to get warmed up before walking home. The greeter at the door smiled and shook her hand so for a moment she thought she made a good choice. Then she realized she didn’t know where to go or what to do. She followed the stream of people and did what they did. It seemed like a friendly, joyful church people wear talking, smiling and laughing. Several people said “good morning” and “welcome” yet no one stopped to have a conversation with her. The worship service was nice although it was awkward to know exactly what she was supposed to do and when. She hoped no one thought she was being disrespectful when she remained seated for the song, unaware that people were standing, as

she first picked up the Bible, then the wrong song book as she frantically looked for the song they were singing. She thought of the sign “guests are welcome” and thought if they want to really welcome me, then someone should sit by me and help me navigate through this service. After the service she longed for a conversation with anyone. She lingered. Again several people said good morning, however no one took the time to talk to her. She went home feeling alone, afraid and depressed. She thought, the church doesn’t really care for her and neither does God. She had just attended a church of insiders. A church where insiders have great friendships. A church where insiders are so eager to talk with their friends they forget to take time to look around for a guest. A church where insiders are so connected with one another they forget to invite new people into their fellowship. The sad truth is this lady could have attended this church for weeks and still would not be truly welcomed into the insider circle. Oh sure some people would learn her name and say good morning and welcome, yet they would not take the next step and invite her into their inside conversations or take the time to get to know her, to perhaps offer her a ride, to perhaps ask her to enjoy a cup of coffee with them.

A bold young man was feeling pretty good about worshipping God at a church for the first time. He was invited by a friend. He got up early, showered, put on a nice pair of jeans, his favorite T-shirt and pulled back his long hair anchoring it with his hat. He got lost and got there late yet the ushers were friendly, got him a bulletin and even a chair so he could sit in the back. After worship he heard someone say to him, “young man”. He turned to extend his hand in greeting. He was shocked when his hand was ignored. He was speechless when the person continued. Young man, you need to take off your hat. He was crushed. He was their guest. He put on his best hat. He left that church. Never told his friend that he even attended their church and made good on his vow to never attend a church again. A hat person doesn’t overcome their judgments with grace. A hat person instead of reaching out in gracious, accepting, welcoming love gets stuck on a hat, a tattoo, a piercing, a behavior, a mannerism, something that they don’t like. Hat people at their best hurt others by ignoring them in disapproval and at their worst speak their judgment. Hat people give the impression that God is cold, judgmental, that you got to have it together to attend church. Hat people drive people away from church. One hat person can easily smother the gracious hospitality of others.

A young single mom stands awkwardly in the entry way with her toddler, looking around at all the people she does not know on her first visit to church. An acquaintance at work casually mentioned how she loved the music at her church and invited her to visit, but now she is not so sure this was a good idea. She is wondering about child care, self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one, unsure where the bathroom is, to timid to ask directions, doubting whether this is the right worship service for her or whether this is even the right church. Where is she to sit, what is it going to feel like to sit alone with her child, and what if her little one makes too much noise? She feels the need for prayer; for some connection to others and for something to lift her above the daily grind of her job, the unending bills, the conflicts with her ex-husband and her worries for her child. Numerous people smiled and said good morning unfortunately she attended a church of safety people. Safety people believe she is a fellow member of Jesus’ family and Jesus wants them to treat her as they would treat Jesus himself. They know they are called to provide gracious hospitality, to ease her awkwardness, to enthusiastically help, to serve, to graciously receive, to support and encourage. Yet safety people get stuck in their comfort zone. One safety person thought surely someone else will welcome her. Another person needed to play it safe and walked by for they were the lay reader and needed to focus on their readings. Another safety person just didn’t feel comfortable talking to a stranger. Another person was having a bad day so they played it safe by rationalizing they would welcome the next guest. Another safety person doesn’t have children and is not sure what the church offers for families so let a family welcome her. And on and on it went this family was never truly welcomed because the church members didn’t want to venture out of their comfort zone. Gracious hospitality begins with a single heart, a movement from “they ought” to “I will”.

A teenage boy entered the sanctuary. It was the church to which his parents belonged. He slumped down in a seat that was as far away from the front as possible and pulled his ball cap low on his forehead and settled in for a nap. He didn't know why he was there. He could sleep more comfortably in his bed. He didn't want to be there, church was a drag—a religious institution focused on its own survival and uninterested in people like him. Just as he was moving into pre-sleep, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Great, he thought, I must be in someone's seat. They can have it. I am going home. He looked up into the face of a woman he did not know. She had a warm, joyful smile. She didn't ask him to move, or sit up or take off his hat, or pay attention. She simply placed a bag of butterscotch in his hand and said, I am so glad you are here. I bought this for you because I heard that you really like butterscotch. I do too! There aren't many of us around. He didn't open that bag of butterscotch for a long time. In fact he hung it on the wall of his bedroom right beside his heavy metal posters, his guitar and his poems of emptiness and longing. It reminded him that someone, the church, cared for him. That lady noticed him, took the time to find out that he liked butterscotch, purchased and gave the butterscotch to him, no strings attached. It was a reminder of gracious hospitality. He kept thinking of the butterscotch, maybe God loves and cares for me too, maybe God's grace is like the butterscotch lady. The boy discovered hope through the gracious hospitality of the butterscotch lady. Years later he became joyful as he savored God's grace for him. He became active at church because he knew he belonged to the family of God. This man will quickly tell you that the turning point in his life was the smile and gracious hospitality of the butterscotch lady.

Throughout the Bible we read of God encouraging believers to provide gracious hospitality. God called Abraham and blessed Abraham so he could bless others with the love of God. Hear God's word to you from Genesis 18. **Genesis 18 1-8** **“God appeared to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. It was the hottest part of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing. He ran from his tent to greet them and bowed before them. He said, “Master, if it please you, stop for a while with your servant. I'll get some water so you can wash your feet. Rest under this tree. I'll get some food to refresh you on your way, since your travels have brought you across my path.” They said, “Certainly. Go ahead.” Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. He said, “Hurry. Get three cups of our best flour; knead it and make bread.” Then Abraham ran to the cattle pen and picked out a nice plump calf and gave it to the servant who lost no time getting it ready. Then he got curds and milk, brought them with the calf that had been roasted, set the meal before the men, and stood there under the tree while they ate.”**

Abraham was not a safety person for he left the comfort of his cool home on this hot day and ran to greet complete strangers. Abraham was not a hat person for instead of judging these strangely dressed, crazy, wandering travelers, he graciously bowed before them. Abraham was not an insider person he did not let his focus on Sarah, their conversation and tasks hinder him from providing gracious hospitality. Abraham's hospitality was radically gracious. He was a butterscotch person. Abraham quickly prepared their best bread, their best beef as the strangers relaxed. Abraham served their best meal and waited for them to enjoy seconds, all they wanted, before his family ate what was leftover. God appeared to Abraham through his offering of gracious hospitality.

Jesus showed gracious hospitality for all, which was a reflection of his mission to love, forgive, save and welcome home all. Jesus explained that we will be blessed for extending gracious hospitality. Listen as Jesus speaks to you from Matthew **Matthew 25:34-40** **““Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.' "Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn**

truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.”

The Apostle Paul was asked about hospitality particularly as it relates to the inclusion of those who come with different backgrounds, stories, beliefs and practices. Paul’s instruction is to **Romans 15:7 “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”**

Pastor Robert Schnase says “Christian hospitality is the active desire to invite, welcome, receive and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.” Pastor Robert says our hospitality is to be radical exceeding expectations. Practicing radically hospitality means we offer the absolute utmost of ourselves, our creativity and our abilities to offer the gracious invitation and welcome of Christ to others. We pray, plan and work to invite others and help them feel welcome and support them in their spiritual journeys.” Gracious hospitality is welcoming one another just as Jesus has welcomed you for the glory of God.

God calls all of us to provide gracious hospitality that connects people with God so they can receive what they truly need from God. Pastor Robert says, “People need to know God loves them, that they are of supreme value and that their life has significance. People need to know that they are not alone; that when they face life’s difficulties, they are surrounded by a community of grace; and that they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic hardships and the temptations that hurt themselves and others. People need to know the peace that runs deeper than an absence of conflict, the hope that sustains them even through the most painful periods of grief, the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them and lifts them out of their own preoccupations. People need to learn how to offer and accept forgiveness and how to serve and be served. As a school of love, the church becomes a congregation where people learn from one another how to love. People need to know that life is not having something to live on but something to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself but by giving of oneself. People need a sustaining sense of purpose.” People need to experience God through your gracious hospitality.

God calls us to be Jesus hands and feet, to provide the invitation and embrace of Jesus, the gracious welcome that creates genuine belonging that brings people together in Christian Community. Gracious hospitality stretches us, challenges us and pulls out of us our utmost creativity moving us to provide radical, gracious love. Gracious hospitality overcomes every barrier, stereotype or boundary enabling us to see others as Jesus sees them. Gracious hospitality inspires us with an active desire to invite, welcome, receive and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Jesus. We were all once strangers to the family of faith, residing outside the community where hopefully you are now abundant blessed. Whose gracious hospitality welcomed you into church? Was it a parent, spouse, friend or a stranger? How did they welcome you? //pause// Give thanks for the courage and hospitality of that person and pray for God to guide you in welcoming others. How can you welcome others? //pause//

When we provide gracious hospitality we partner with God in providing renewed life sustained by love. **Romans 15:7 “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”** In regards to gracious hospitality, are you a butterscotch person? Amen