

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Genesis 18:1-15

June 12, 2006
The Rev. Robin L. Long

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Martha Stewart is one of the most divisive personalities of our time. Though her legal troubles are simmering down, her true divisiveness doesn't stem from that aspect of her life. Rather, what is so divisive, and some might consider even damaging about Martha, is the basis of comparison that she sets up. In the era before Martha, people had folks over for dinner, it was called having company. Maybe it was a four course meal, maybe it was pizza. But, in this post-Martha era in which we live, having company has evolved into "entertaining." A favorite chicken casserole recipe will not suffice. To be a gracious host, one must serve appetizers that puff and steam. Soups can be hot or cold, depending on the season and the angle of the sun. Salads have fruits in them that one can only find in the finest specialty stores and then, if you can even find them, it's hard to figure out what to do with them. After all, a star fruit looks neat—but is the skin edible? What about the seeds? And then there are the entrees that have fancy sauces—never just plain old gravy—and these sauces are always drizzled. What is this with drizzling? Just pour the stuff on, for Pete's sake. And the desserts—soufflés, mousses, and things to which you have to take a small blow torch to "candy" the top are the finishing touches on any meal worth serving. And this is to say nothing for the starched table cloth with some seasonally appropriate theme, napkins folded like osprey, silverware that has been polished, and glasses—oh the glasses—water glasses, ice tea glasses, wine glasses—different depending on if you're drinking white, red, or blush. And finally, the party favors. The food in their stomachs isn't enough of a

gift—now you have to come up with some kind of a favor for them to take home. Martha often suggests something handmade. Anyone got time to make some hand-dipped candles? Perhaps you'd like to make a fine organically-scented soap?

Sadly, for many, these have become the standards for “gracious hostessing.” This is what we call entertaining. Well, call me ungracious, pour on the gravy, and dab your chin with a paper napkin because I'm no “Martha.”

What these unreasonable standards of entertaining have done is to take the hospitality out of entertaining. I have been to many a dinner party—and admit to throwing a few myself—where, by the time the guests actually arrive, the host and hostess are exhausted from the effort and just go through the motions until their guests finally leave. From the first hors' d'oeuvres popped into someone's mouth to the last sip of coffee drained from a cup; it's like some kind of a test or performance. It is, quite literally, a form of entertainment—not an exercise in hospitality.

What then is the difference between hospitality and entertaining? According to Ana Maria Pineda in the book *Practicing Our Faith*, “. . .hospitality not only welcomes strangers; it also recognizes their holiness. It sees in the stranger a person dear to and made in the image of God, someone bearing distinctive gifts that only he or she can bring.” An entertainer has an audience—an audience is kept at arm's length, an audience is an object not a subject. When one extends hospitality, the other is treated as the subject, welcomed into a community—not just invited for a show.

“The Gospel is 98% hospitality and I can't remember what the other 2% is”, says Daehler Hayes, former minister of the Rhode Island Conference of the United Church of Christ. Perhaps he's over-stating it, but he does have a good point. Jesus engaged in radical hospitality. He welcomed all people, especially those who were scorned by others—tax collectors (as frowned upon in that day as are our modern day telemarketers), the poor, the sick, and even the dirty and smelly folks. Jesus practiced hospitality; he recognized the holy in each person he encountered.

But the art of hospitality wasn't original to Jesus. It dates far back into his Jewish heritage. Abraham practiced hospitality when he was sitting in his tent one day during the intense afternoon heat and looked up and saw three men standing near the entrance of his tent. He went to get them water so he could wash their feet, he had Sarah make them some bread, he killed a prize calf to feed them for dinner, and he gave them milk to drink. This was extravagant Hospitality of Biblical Proportions. And it was a good thing that Abraham did what he did too as one of the men turned out to be God escorted by two angels. ‘Tis a good thing that Abraham didn't respond to the three strangers standing in the doorway to his tent with—“Hey, what'cha lookin' at. You gotta a problem? Huh? Move it along. Move it along. There's nothing to see here.”

No, instead he practiced hospitality, offering the strangers the very best he had in order that they would feel welcome in his home. He sat with them while they ate. He listened to them.

He was attentive. And God asks the same of us—that we be attentive to the stranger in our midst—that we practice hospitality and look for what is holy in each person we meet.

It may sound simple—after all, we have our PIE person, the sign-in book, and I send all of our new visitors a note. But in some ways, that’s just entertaining. But, true hospitality is risky business. In the book, *Hospitality to the Stranger*, Thomas Ogletree writes, “To offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our life-world. . . . Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations. The stories invite us to view the world from a novel perspective.” When we entertain, the audience has very little impact on us. When we offer hospitality, we open ourselves to the subject—the other—and the other changes us.

And that is one of the things that makes hospitality so much more challenging than mere entertaining, no matter how complex the hors d’oeuvres or how carefully drizzled the sauce. When we practice hospitality, we run the risk of changing and the prospect of change is often quite daunting—we prefer things to stay the same, thank you very much. And yet, God rarely asks us to do what is easy or comfortable.

And it is that fear of being uneasy or uncomfortable that keeps mere social entertainers from becoming practitioners of hospitality to strangers. Fear is the roadblock to hospitality. And, in some instances, there are good reasons to be fearful. Strangers can be dangerous. It’s why we teach children to yell, “Stranger, Stranger” if an unknown person solicits them. And, there is some of the “Stranger, Stranger” instinct in all of us as well because the stranger is other and unknown. I am sometimes fearful of practicing radical hospitality with strangers—not because I am fearful of the other but because I am fearful of being rejected or of looking stupid. What if my hospitality is refused? What if my bland pot roast doesn’t stack up to Martha’s black-pepper encrusted salmon with apricot compote drizzled in sun-dried tomato enhanced oil of olive?

And what if it doesn’t? Even Jesus was rebuffed—by his own family in at least one instance. Anything that’s worth doing involves some risk and being hospitable is no different. The question is—is it worth the risk of going beyond entertaining to being truly hospitable?

I believe that Abraham would tell you yes. When he offered hospitality to the strangers, he sat with the very likes of God. And on that occasion, God told him that he and Sarah would have the son for whom they had yearned. I also believe that the innkeeper in Bethlehem would tell you that, yes the risk of being hospitable was worth it. The simple act of offering his stable to some wayward strangers in need put him in the history books as a kind and merciful man—someone who was willing to help when no one else was. I can think of more than one person in this congregation who would tell you that yes, the risk of offering Hospitality of Biblical Proportions is worth it. These are folks who moved to town and didn’t know anyone. One of you took the time to invite them to come along to church one Sunday and now they are some of our most faithful members.

Hospitality is worth the risk of rejection, looking silly, or failure. It is what God calls us to do. It is what we witness over and over again in the Biblical account. And if the church's tradition of carrying out Hospitality of Biblical Proportions is to continue, all of us are the ones who are called to the task. No one is exempt. And so how, in our daily lives, are we going to show hospitality? How are we going to become known as the church that practices Hospitality of Biblical Proportions? How will we become a church that "sees in the stranger—and each other--a person dear to and made in the image of God"?

I propose that we start right here at this table. That we welcome all to partake of the bread and the cup. That we strive to experience what is holy about each other. I propose that we start with one another and serve the person next to us. That's hospitality, that's honoring the godly in each other. We can start small but at least we're started. Our communion napkins might not be folded like Martha's osprey and the bread may not be hand baked with grains we grew and picked from our own fields—but that's not what matters at this table. What matters here is that Jesus shows us radical hospitality and so we can show it to others, too. For just as God was present with Abraham, so too is Jesus present here with us at this table. So come, all of you, because it's time for some Hospitality of Biblical Proportions.