

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Genesis 18:1-5, 9-15

SERMON SERIES: Home, Sweet Home

SERMON TITLE: A Place of Hospitality

The verse from Henry Van Dyke that you find on the front of this morning's bulletin is providing the theme for these Sundays in September:

*But every home where Love abides,
and Friendship is a guest,
Is surely home, and home, sweet home:
For there the heart can rest.¹*

In particular this morning, we're looking at *home, sweet home* as a place of hospitality.

Our scripture lesson is Genesis 18:1-5, 9-15. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE LESSON.**

It's the middle of a Sunday afternoon. You're at home watching TV, or getting ready to take a nap or doing whatever it is you do on a Sunday afternoon at home. The doorbell rings. You interrupt whatever you're doing and go to the door. You're not expecting anyone, so you look through the little peep hole on the door to see who's there. It's a stranger, someone you never seen before. His looks make you uneasy. He's not a UPS or Federal Express guy. You don't know who he is, what he does, or why he's at your door and this makes you uneasy.

So what do you do? Do you stay quiet and hope that he just goes away? Do you speak to him through the door? Do you crack the door just a little bit to speak? Do you open the door and deal with him on the front porch? Or do you open the door, stick out your hand, introduce yourself, and invite the guy in for coffee or a soft drink and feed him some of the left over coffee cake from breakfast? What does hospitality demand?

¹ Van Dyke, Henry. "A Home Song." *As I Like It*. 30 Aug. 2008. 30 Aug. 2008 <<http://sj-ad-infinity.blogspot.com/2008/08/home-song.html>>.

Now I suspect that not many of us would be so quick to invite this guy into our homes for refreshments. It's far too risky. We've learned to be leery of strangers and more than a little bit afraid of what strangers might do to us once we let them into our homes, especially if the strangers appear unexpectedly on our doorsteps and strike us as being somehow different than we are. The result is that in our culture, hospitality is something we share with our families and our friends—but not so much with strangers. Love and friendship may abide in our homes for the people that we know—but not so much for the stranger. Home, sweet home may be a place where the heart can rest—but not the stranger's heart.

But Abraham's home was different. He lived in a different culture that placed an extraordinarily high value on hospitality, not just for friends, neighbors and loved ones, but for strangers. Hospitality in those days and in that culture required offering food, shelter and protection. Even more than that, hospitality required offering respect, acceptance and friendship.

And that's what Abraham did. Can you believe the hospitality Abraham showed to those three strangers? He ran to meet them, he bowed down before them, he said to them, *My lord* (giving the guests the higher position), and he referred to himself twice as their *servant*. He offered them water to wash their feet, rest under the tree, and a little bread to boot! In fact, in part of the story that we didn't hear, Abraham put on a veritable feast complete with meat from a calf served with curds and milk—all for strangers!

But it wasn't just Abraham and Sarah. As one commentator has noted: *For the ancient Israelites, showing hospitality was intimately connected to their identity as God's people. They had been strangers themselves, and in their covenantal relationship with God knew themselves*

*to be dependent on God for welcome, and answerable to God for the welcome they showed others.*²

And it wasn't just the Israelites. In Romans 12:13, Paul urges the church to *extend hospitality to strangers*. Hospitality is a fundamental practice of the Christian life—and it makes for home, sweet home.

But that's not all, for you see, in the scriptures, strangers are not just strangers. Did you notice the confusion in the Genesis text? Verse 1 says, *The Lord appeared to Abraham*, but then immediately we're dealing with three strangers. And the strangers spoke a divine promise about the old and childless Sarah finally having a son. She laughed at that idea, but it happened! Could it be that God was revealed to Abraham and Sarah in the guise of three strangers?

In the New Testament, Hebrews picks up on the theme: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*³ Matthew's gospel makes an equally dramatic claim. In the parable of the Great Judgment, Jesus puts these words into the mouth of the king judging the nations: *“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.”*⁴ Hospitality is a means of grace—and when hospitality is practiced in the home—especially toward the stranger—God is present—and that makes for home, sweet home.

Are there risks involved in showing hospitality to strangers? Sure, but there are also blessings to be found. Rebeca Jimenez Yoder tells this story: *When we lived in the Los Angeles*

² "Hospitality." National Council of Churches USA, 2003. 30 Aug. 2008
<<http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/openhouse-hospitality.html>>.

³ Hebrews 13:2, NRSV.

⁴ Matthew 25:34-35, NRSV.

area, my youngest son, Josh, was about 4 years old. I was concerned about his friendliness since he talked to strangers whenever he had the opportunity. He would talk to anybody and everybody willing to talk with him. He would even ask them their age! I decided to talk with him about strangers without scaring him or making him fearful of people. I just wanted him to be a little more cautious.

At that moment a man who worked at a car dealership down the street from our house was walking to work. I knew he lived somewhere in our neighborhood, but he didn't seem very friendly. I explained to Josh that he was a stranger because we did not really know him, we had never spoken to him and we did not know who he was.

As I finished explaining to Josh my definition of stranger, he responded, "Mom, he is not stranger: he is Bob!" Needless to say my lesson about strangers ended and I did not know what else to say or do. I was concerned about Josh's safety as we were living in a big city. However, his friendliness was inspiring: could we become more like Josh and "know no strangers?"⁵

Home, sweet home is a place for hospitality where even a stranger's heart can find rest in love and friendship. And in the stranger, we might just find God. But if we don't practice hospitality at home, how are we going to practice hospitality in other places like at church with the strangers we meet here each and every Sunday? Perhaps we have something to learn from Abraham and Sarah about hospitality.

Come to think of it, even God practices hospitality. Isn't that why we all have a place at this table? Thanks be to God.

⁵ Yoder, Rebeca J. "Hospitality: Welcoming the Strangers Among Us." Peace and Justice Support Network of Mennonite Church USA. Mennonite Church USA. 30 Aug. 2008 <<http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/immigyoder.html>>.

