
Welcoming Others, in Abraham's Time and Our Own

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 6 - Year A**

This pandemic has really done a number on the hospitality industry, hasn't it? And on hospitality in general? A couple weeks ago, after over two months of social distancing and relative quarantine with three teenagers, in a house that seemed to get smaller and messier by the day, my husband and I discussed having some neighbors over for a backyard cook-out.

However, we realized that even if we stayed outside, our friends may need to come in for something, and they could see inside anyway through the windows. So I started to look around, with a fresh visitor's eye, and I was embarrassed by what I saw: long-neglected projects; dishes in the sink and laundry on the sofa; papers burying the coffee table and a puzzle covering the kitchen table; and the dogs' latest conquest, a shredded tennis ball, strewn across the floor. We couldn't let anyone see this, how we *really* live, and it would be too much work to straighten it all up. So we decided we weren't ready to have guests, not yet.

What a far cry from Abraham, sitting near his tent in the desert, in the heat of the day, sweating up a storm, when three strangers come by. He doesn't survey his abode to see if it's presentable. Nor does he secure it and watch them suspiciously, or post something on his neighborhood's Nextdoor site, or call the police. No, he runs out to meet them, bows with respect, and asks them to stay and eat. He shows no fear: no fear of danger or embarrassment or exposure or difference or anything else. On the contrary, he seems downright excited, joyful even, as he and his household hurry to prepare the finest of what they have: bread from their finest flour, and their very best calf—a good and tender calf. When it's all ready, Abraham himself serves them, and then gives them space, standing off under a nearby tree.

Then it emerges that these are no ordinary strangers (as if there were such a thing!), because they know Sarah's name and announce that she'll have a son, even though she's old and past childbearing. It's so preposterous that Sarah laughs, and the Lord—the *Lord*—answers, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

With that, these strangers, these holy others, show Abraham and Sarah a bigger promise and a bigger God than they ever could have known on their own.

Of course, it is not all smooth sailing from this point on. Sarah and Abraham's life will change, as they live into this bigger promise and have this child in their old age. No longer able to claim they're "too old," the very way they define themselves will change, too.

And I wonder if this is precisely why this kind of radical hospitality can be so hard to come by, and why we may even resist it: because it leads to change. It makes us see things we don't want to see, and clean up our house or re-order our lives. It often demands that we surrender a cherished self-image or privilege or preconception, or enemy; and that we stretch, in turn, toward a bigger truth, a bigger identity, a bigger belonging.

But this is precisely why we need this kind of hospitality now! I'm not talking about the niceties of entertaining, but truly welcoming the other—and not just into our homes, but into our hearts and minds. Making room for the other, who may be of another race, gender, religion, politics, profession—or our own spouse or parent or child. We never know another person so fully that they cease to be a holy mystery!

But you and I live in a different time and place from Abraham, of course; and most of us don't have a good and tender calf and milk and curds on hand to offer guests. So what might hospitality look like, in this moment? What can we offer?

We can start with intention and preparation. We can prepare our hearts and minds through prayer, discernment, soul-searching. Confession and repentance. We can prepare through education—through intentional reading and studying, seeking to understand different experiences and perspectives. We can prepare by trying to keep our own house in order, trying to live with integrity and transparency, so that we aren't so panicked when a guest arrives.

But beware of the paralysis of preparation! You'll never know all you need to; you'll never be fully prepared, or feel perfectly presentable. At some point, you just have to open up, or show up, as you are, and offer the gift of your presence. Your full presence. Your real, messy, courageous, and beautiful presence.

At the same time, we honor the real, messy, courageous, and beautiful presence of the other. One of the easiest, and hardest, ways to honor the sacred other is to listen. Indeed, is there any better way to respect the dignity of the other, than to see them, really see them, and to listen and learn? In a way, isn't that what we all want?

I'm coming to believe that listening is the growing edge for me personally and socially—as a wife and mother, and as a white person, here, today. It's time to listen in ways I haven't before: disarming my alarm system; relinquishing my self-righteousness, self-justification, and privilege; and listening, deeply, to others. Listening especially to my Black brothers and sisters, and other friends of color; listening to anger and the hope underneath it; listening to conservative and liberal friends (and I have plenty of both!); listening to those closest to me, my husband and children, especially when they're making me mad. When it is hardest to list.

And listening to myself, as I'm listening: *What's triggering my defense mechanisms, and why? What am I afraid of? What is the challenge to me here, and where is the blessing?*

However, while listening may be my growing edge, it cannot become an excuse to protect myself from exposure or embarrassment, or to expect other people to do my work for me. It doesn't excuse me from risking action, or speech, or relationship myself. How will I ever grow without making mistakes, or admitting what I don't understand? Without trusting others enough to offer up my honest fears and reactions and assumptions, to critique or correction?

This is hard work, to be sure, but it's also joyful work. Joy is another important contour of hospitality: we're to receive one another with joy, to delight in the other, and give thanks for the challenge and blessing they bring.

After all, don't we all know what it is to be a stranger, ourselves? Aren't we all, in some way, strangers in this world, strangers to one another, strangers to ourselves. Yes, even to ourselves. We all have within us a stranger, who bears hurts and longings, gifts and limitations, which may frighten or embarrass or confuse us. And yet, the more we can welcome and care for this stranger within, the more we can welcome and care for the stranger without.

That's not all! As our Gospel reminds us, we're called to be strangers, also. It's part of our vocation as Christians! Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim the good news and do good works, depending on the hospitality of others. He sends us out, too, out of our comfort zones, to share the good news in word and deed, and to grow, together, toward a bigger truth and a bigger hope, by the grace of the God who welcomes us all—who has more than enough room, and is always prepared, to welcome us all.