

St. David's United Church, Calgary

HOSPITALITY

Sunday, July 21st, 2019

Texts: A Son is Promised to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-10) and Jesus Visits Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) NRSV.

A Son is Promised to Abraham and Sarah

18 The Lord appeared to Abraham[a] by the oaks[b] of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. **2** 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. **3** He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. **4** Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. **5** 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." **6** And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures[c] of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." **7** Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. **8** 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.

9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." **10** Then 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.

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Jesus Visits Martha and Mary

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. [a] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Additional Text:

Hebrews 13:2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it. (TEV).

Our scripture texts today focus on two circumstances where the reception of guests had become part of the art of human relations.

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In the Ancient Near East, with its rugged terrain and inhospitable climate, hospitality was a very important factor in human endurance.

Our scripture texts today focus on two circumstances where the reception of guests had become an art of human relationship.

Last Sunday, we revisited the parable of the Good Samaritan as told by Jesus and related it to ways that biblical narrative might speak to our experience of the Calgary Stampede as we celebrated Pancake Sunday here at St. David's. Indeed, last Sunday was a day of hospitality as we welcomed up to 700 guests outdoors as well as others for our regular worship service. What a wonderful way of letting the Calgary community know that we exist!

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“Warm welcome” was the phrase I used to connect the Stampede to St. David's and today, I'd like to unpack the theme of “hospitality.” Thanks to Colin Outtrim and his team for helping us make the first step that St. David's people do so well. I'd like to add to that a reminder of our history of “welcoming the stranger” and our longstanding work with refugees to Canada. A number of new Canadians have found a home in his land because of our efforts.

Our Muffin Ministry people have developed a special activity of reaching out to the university community as well. I applaud these efforts, but now let me raise some disconcerting concerns.

The challenge we face is not that we don't know how to welcome people. Our challenge is how to help to transform at least some of the many who pass through our doors each week into fellow-supporters of our declining congregation. That decline is obvious in our published attendance figures and financial statistics over the years.

I am deeply concerned about this matter and I think that many of you are concerned as well. In the past, we have tended to draw from one traditional constituency. Today, I want to propose that there are other constituencies to draw from as well. What distinctly Christian benefits can we offer people that is not available elsewhere?

Our Abraham and Sarah text this morning reveals a story in which three strangers visit. The old patriarch welcomes them with a warm graciousness. He asks Sarah his wife, and his household to provide these guests with water for refreshment and the best food and drink available. Little did Sarah and Abraham realize that their guests were messengers from God bringing with them a special gift and a promise.

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Our Mary and Martha text relays the familiar tale of how two women friends of Jesus welcome him to their home in different ways. The first is focused on the practical aspects of their hospitality, while the second invests in what Jesus has to share with them - “the better part” - according to the story.

In both Hebrew and Christian Bible accounts, the art or ethics of hospitality is performed. Each expression is one of indiscriminating love, receptivity and kindness and in both cases a special promise or gift is given by the guest. That is why I added an additional text:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2).

Abraham and Sarah produce a child in their old age. Mary and Martha discover the special spiritual benefit of having Jesus in their midst.

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How might these stories apply to us? I offer three suggestions for turning hospitality in community that I believe offer hope for our congregation today.

First, our church stands in a strategic location. We are situated near a significant LRT station in our city. People from many parts of Calgary can get to our facility with or without a car.

We find ourselves across the LRT tracks from the University of Calgary. What a marvelous resource for people we have here - be they students, staff or faculty! An actual city exists nearby our Capitol Hill community and in close proximity to us. How well are we taking advantage of the resources available to us? Have we thought about

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what we offer the university? Some years ago we discovered that we could provide economic parking spaces. That has proven to be a mutual boon - and a major supplement to our church budget. We have started to think about other services, like muffins and conversation with students and their friends. How might we build on educational resource-sharing that so that the contacts we make will draw others into our faith community? We already benefit from an exchange of musical assets through Brent and our Music Ministry; and that can be creatively expanded over time.

That leads naturally into some serious thought about the spiritual, intellectual and material resources that even now we possess as a congregation - and what we could offer in the future. We confine ourselves and limit our potential when we continue to think inside boxes that worked in the past, but which offer diminishing returns today. We need to do more external reckoning to focus on outreach, rather than self-preservation. We can build on our strengths rather than feel negatively and inadequately about our weaknesses. In time, previously effective ministries can be restored, but guided in new ways.

A final suggestion is that of perceived challenges. Many of us are inclined to think of the difficulties we have been encountering as problems. I suggest that a lot of these problems may prove to be possibilities in disguise. A personal example. When I first attended St. David's I couldn't possibly get to know all the members here very well. Now, I feel I can personally relate to a much higher percentage of our community, and community awareness is the first step to community renewal.

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Our strategic location. Our current spiritual, intellectual and material resources, and our perceived problems that are actually possibilities.

These suggestions are just the beginning. I offer them to get us thinking about what the future St. David's might be.

Some of our current programs are already demonstrating creative possibilities. We still have a substantial base, wonderful people and real achievements to celebrate. But much more needs to be done. Attendance on a given Sunday morning should not be the indicator of the over-all meaning and effectiveness of our life together. St. David's has always been a weeklong as well as a Sunday morning church service.

Even now, we are host to two new Canadian congregations of Filipino and East Indian backgrounds. What do we know about them? What can we learn from them?

Intentionally expanding ministries through the week like pastoral care and living with respect to creation led by Debbie Stockdale, can be great feeders for our Sunday morning program. We know from past experience that intentional ministries can build our congregational base. We need to discover that again.

Our Sacred Service Ministry has proven that a vital volunteer cadre can expand our impact and decrease our costs.

Did you know that our ACTS ministry involved about 350 people last year - two-thirds of whom were different individuals?

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Did you know that ACTS Ministry gets no money from the St. David's program budget and a very small proportion of our staff budget? Yet, we are currently supporting up to ten activities including various studies, the church library, spiritual and social justice travel, seniors support and Mc Dougall Mission Morley indigenous reconciliation. What has been happening in ACTS ministry can happen in all our ministries!

Did you know that our Drama Group has a tremendous community outreach among children and youth? Drama is entirely run by unpaid support under the able leadership of Janice Rider and her team. We don't need paid staff members to shepherd effective programs like this. We need to be asking - what other gaps need to be filled?

To conclude:

HOSPITALITY means being good hosts and hostesses. It means paying attention to the angels that pass through our doors daily and weekly. That, I believe, is an important lesson to be learned from Abraham and Sarah, from Mary and Martha today.

I hope that, with these words, I have started some productive thinking and conversation.

Amen.

