

## *Hospitality on Four Floors*

Genesis 18:1-15

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

September 4, 2011

One day Abraham was sitting in the opening of his tent, waiting for the day to cool off, when he looked up and saw three men standing there, three total strangers. We know from verse 1 that these three strangers were the Lord appearing to Abraham, but Abraham doesn't know that yet. He just sees three strangers.

How does he react? If we saw three strangers we might ask them what they were selling, or what cult they were promoting. On Block Island we would assume they are tourists who have lost their way. But notice how Abraham reacts. He treats these strangers as if they were persons of honor—and he would have done this no matter who they were, because that was part of Near Eastern hospitality. He bows down low to the ground. He speaks to the guest as “my lord,” and he refers to himself as “your servant.” Abraham acts as if the guests would be doing him a favor if they would accept his offer of food. He has water brought so that the feet of the guests can be washed.

Abraham runs to the tent to his wife. “Sarah, start baking some pita bread and chop up some tabouli. We’ve got company!” Then he runs out to his cattle and finds a calf he was planning to raise. He drags it over to a servant and says, “We’re going to eat this calf tonight, so get cooking!” When everything is ready, Abraham himself serves the dinner, and he stands nearby and watches his guests eat, assuming the position of a servant.

After dinner there is a surprise. The three strangers have something to give. They give a promise. The Lord, in the form of the strangers, says to Abraham, “A year from now I’ll come back, and your wife Sarah will have a son.” Abraham and Sarah, very old, had given up hope of ever having a child, but now as they welcome these three guests, the guests give them the gift of hope.

Christians have used this story since the earliest days of the church to teach what Jesus taught about receiving strangers: sometimes when you welcome a guest, you are welcoming the Lord himself. They took the Near Eastern cultural tradition of opening your home to those who were passing through and made it a spiritual duty. Hospitality was as much a part of the normal Christian life as worship or prayer or concern for the poor.

Consider the commands in the New Testament. Hebrews 13:2 refers to the story in Genesis: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Romans 12:13 says, “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” I Peter 4:9 says, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling,” which makes you think that by the time that letter was written Christians were practicing hospitality but they were already complaining about having to open their homes to strangers. If you read the list of qualifications for bishops or overseers in 1 Timothy and Titus, you’ll see that one of the moral qualifications is that they must be hospitable. This was a moral issue, and you could not be a leader in the church if you were not moral in that way.

I think we all agree that hospitality is a good thing, but we tend to think that it’s a spiritual gift or a personality trait—some people have it and some don’t. But in the New Testament it was a duty. When they decided which of the elderly women in the church got on the list for charitable support, this was one of the criteria—however poor they were, they must be

hospitable. Hospitality is not the ability to throw great parties; it's having a heart that is open to strangers. You probably know the Greek word *xenophobia*, the fear of strangers or foreigners. The New Testament word for hospitality is just the opposite: *philoxenia*, the love of strangers. And that attitude was acted out in concrete ways, by inviting people into your home for dinner and providing lodging for them.

There are churches that are xenophobic, giving the cold shoulder to visitors and to people that are different from the members. And there are churches that are xenophilic, friendly to strangers. If we weren't open to strangers at Harbor Church, we would be freaking out all summer. Hospitality comes naturally to us on Block Island and it's our main industry. But it is one thing to say hi to a visitor in worship and another thing to welcome them into your home and your life.

I want to nail it down as a basic value of Harbor Church that we are a hospitable church. This house is not just for us; it's for our neighbors and even for those who happen to pass by. We are not about locking up tight and protecting what we have; we are open to whoever comes our way, for it might be the Lord himself. I want you to think for a moment about how that value of hospitality applies to all four floors of the church.

Let's start in the basement. We open the basement to teenagers as a Rec Center. For years that was something we just let the town do; now we do it ourselves in the summer. We are opening the *church* to the teenagers, not just the Rec Center. We just signed a new lease with the town in which they agree to let the church use the basement for our own youth activities all during the year—for youth group activities (if we can get enough of you to help with them) and for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. That's a form of hospitality.

Then we come to the first floor. The Fellowship Hall is probably the most open space in the community—not just used for Bible study and coffee hour, but for pottery classes, AA, BIRA, bridge group, Committee for the Great Salt Pond, Prevention Task Force, Mental Health Task Force, blood drives, on and on. But it's on Friday nights that we exercise hospitality in its purest form. The Soup and Song Coffeehouse is not primarily an entertainment venue or a way for church people to have fellowship: it is an experiment in hospitality evangelism. We are living out the Jesus message by welcoming people into our space, feeding them, making them feel at home, and sharing both our music and their music. I don't think many of you have “gotten” that concept yet. You think of it as one more option for a night's entertainment that you can take or leave, rather than an expression of our church's identity and a ministry to which God is calling you.

Now we move into this room as a hospitable space. Of course we want to be friendly to guests, but even our form of worship needs to be accommodating—in language nonbelievers can understand, in songs that connect with them, in acts of worship that are simple and explained so that everyone can participate.

Now let's go up the stairs. We may think of the second floor as private space, the back stage of the church. But even there, hospitality can be our value. Our offices, as cluttered as they are, welcome a surprising number of people from outside the church—representatives of community groups, outsiders getting married, individuals in crisis. The sexton's apartment, which will be empty soon as Bob moves on, needs to be filled with someone with the heart of a host who welcomes everyone into our space. And while the parsonage does to some extent represent a haven for the pastor and his family, it is a tremendous resource for ministry as we put up performers and speakers overnight and welcome others for meals.

There's one more flight of stairs. Some of you haven't been up there in years. But there sits the empty third floor, with its brand new windows. To some people it looks like a haunted house, suitable only for ghosts. But to other people those Victorian hotel rooms are lonely, yearning for the day when they will see guests again. Ever since the church moved into the hotel sixty years ago, there has been this opportunity—to see church and hotel not as two unrelated entities, but to see them tied together by hospitality. Developing the third floor as a place where we can welcome guests to reflect on life and God's place in it—and as a place where we can welcome groups of poets or environmentalists to have their own programs within our embrace—will make concrete and visible our identity as the hotel-church, the hospitable harbor for whoever God's wind blows in. “But Jesus,” we will ask on the last day, “when did we ever see you a stranger and take you in?” And he will say, “Whenever you did it for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.”

Jesus meets us today as the host at this table. He sets a feast before us in the presence of our enemies. He gathers us not at an altar but at a table, where we sit down to share a meal with him. Jesus is not merely remembered in this meal; he is encountered. It is not we who welcome him; he welcomes us—to his table, to his meal, to share what he gives us of his good company and his love. He is, as always, the friend of sinners, who shares his table with the unrighteous. He is the king who welcomes the blind and the lame to his banquet. Of all the teachers who have ever lived, this one is the most gracious in his hospitality. Of all the gods that might have been, the one that turns out to be the real God is the one who welcomes us as his guests.