

Sermons from Park Hill: June 15, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

**Rev. Dr. David Bahr
pastor@parkhillchurch.org**

June 15, 2008

**Genesis 18:1-15, 21: 1-7
“Promise, Patience, and a Big
Party”**

With my first glance at the text for today, I thought I would preach about the example that Abraham and Sarah set in never believing things are too late. There is no time too late for God to act in our lives. There is no time too long to wait for promises to be fulfilled. Promises delayed are not promises denied.

If you remember from last week, Abraham and Sarah were about 75 years old when God told them to move to a new land, and that they would have so many offspring, their children and their children's children and their children's children's children – and so on – would be as hard to count as the sands on a beach. They were a pretty unlikely couple to give birth to a nation. But they did as God said. They received that promise at age 75 and picked right up and

moved all the magnitude of their possessions. And then they quickly waited another 25 years before giving birth to even their first son. Abraham had fathered another son by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian servant, but it kind of turned into a nightmare with power dynamics between Sarah and Hagar that involved a little too much drama – but that's a story I'll tell another time. So anyway, I began preparing my sermon with the idea that the focus would be on promises and patience and some other “p” word that was still yet to come. Promises, patience and --- paternity... Promises, patience, and pregnancy...

But then I went back to the first several verses of the text and heard something different this time. I recognized the magnitude of the hospitality Abraham and Sarah showed to these three visitors - strangers. This is a story of extravagant hospitality.

Abraham sees and runs out to three strangers and doesn't just offer them some water and bread. In fact, he doesn't offer them anything at first, except a request that they find him worthy to serve them. “If I find favor with you, please don't pass by my house, but let me serve you.” In contrast, have you ever seen someone coming down the street and you yell, “Quick, turn out the lights and close the drapes. Keep quiet so they don't hear us in here.” Bang, bang, bang. “I guess no one's home,” and they leave. Or have you seen neighbors keep their lights off on Halloween, hoping no children would come to the door.

But Abraham did just the opposite. These three strangers were passing by and didn't ask for anything, but Abraham essentially begged, “If it's OK with you, please stay

Sermons from Park Hill: June 15, 2008

here and let me serve you." Some water to wash their feet, some shade to cool them down. He says he'll bring them a little bread, but then proceeds to order a feast for them – and notice it was "choice" flour for the cakes, and not an old cow but a "tender" calf, curds and milk. The point of items is that they were very extravagant gifts, not just a little water in the heat of the day and a morsel of bread on a long journey.

Hospitality is central to many cultures but it's becoming kind of a lost art in America. Martha Stewart and others are trying to reinvigorate the traditions like hosting a gracious dinner party, but this is at the same time that many new houses aren't even built with dining rooms or a living room to entertain guests. As I was preparing for today, I went to marthastewart.com thinking I could find some rules for hospitality or the etiquette of welcoming guests. I expected to find such things as a top 10 list or helpful advice for entertaining friends and strangers alike. Nothing. There were directions about setting a nice table, creating little name cards and gift boxes, but nothing about how one should treat a guest. The closest thing I found on her website was the instruction not to invite too many or too few guests – always six, Martha advises. If you're interested: Four people turns into a double date; eight people splits into two conversations. And according to Martha, when it comes to a dinner party, balance is everything. Balance, and sending invitations at least two weeks in advance; a month if it's a busy time of the year. Hear the word of Martha.

Of course, hospitality is more attitude than rules. And it's also more central to the spiritual life than we might think. Hospitality is a spiritual gift. Marjorie Thompson, in *Soul Feast*, dedicates a whole chapter to

hospitality, implying the same importance as prayer. Jesus has more to say about the etiquette of hospitality than we might think would be important. Jesus talks about economic justice in the gospels more than any other single topic – but hospitality is often central to the discussion. "Don't invite your friends to a banquet but those who cannot pay you back." Go out to the highways and hedges to compel unlikely guests to your feast. Don't run out of wine at a wedding banquet. People criticized him for eating with sinners and outcasts. And in the gospel reading from Matthew assigned for today, he advises the disciples whom he has sent out into the countryside, "If anyone will not welcome you, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. For truly, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town."

Now it's interesting that Jesus makes reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in the midst of a discussion about being welcomed as strangers to a town. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah comes right after our reading today about Abraham's extravagant hospitality. It serves as an example of cities that do not treat strangers with respect, an immediate and sharp contrast to Abraham. When Jesus refers to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah it is about their lack of hospitality to strangers, which to him was not about being nice but a sacred obligation. By disrespecting guests, you are disrespecting God. By not offering food and shelter to someone in need, you are ignoring the commandment of God to love your neighbor as yourself.

"We Believe Colorado" is an interfaith coalition of people working for the common good. They had an event Thursday night that several of us attended. I attended a

Sermons from Park Hill: June 15, 2008

workshop where it was noted that many politicians are more concerned with who you sleep with than whether you have a place to sleep. That's a basic violation of a sacred obligation and a continued misreading of Sodom and Gomorrah as having to do with sexuality, not violence and the failure of hospitality.

Christine Pohl, author of *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, writes that "hospitality reminds us that justice and friendship belong together. Concerns about justice can never be abstract and disembodied." Justice is caring about people, but it should also be about friendship with people, creating a more hospitable society.

She's also helpful in reminding us that sustaining hospitality is difficult if it's not shaped by gratitude, if it's not first of all a response of love and gratitude for God's love and welcome to us. "If not shaped by gratitude, when we encounter difficult demands or ungrateful guests, our hospitality quickly becomes grudging. And grudging hospitality exhausts the host and wounds the guest even as it serves them." I've experienced grudging hospitality, and it's not usually very fun. Grudging hospitality also often demands the recipient be grateful – you better be happy I'm giving this to you – rather than the gratitude of the giver: "God has given me so much, I wish I could give you more." Grudging hospitality can also take the form of wishing guests weren't taking us away from our friends.

Over the years I've visited lots of churches – either when I've moved to a new city or when I've been on sabbatical or vacation. Sadly, I haven't really felt very welcome in many of them; and any number of churches with the sign – "The Friendliest Church in

Town" – are engaging in false advertising. The worst example was a church in Cleveland. First, I couldn't tell where to enter the church and many of the doors were locked. I picked a likely door and had to shove hard just to get in. When I finally pushed through the door, the people in the entranceway looked frightened of me. I went up to someone holding bulletins and kind of took it from her since she wasn't really handing it to me. I looked around – and those who didn't look scared didn't even bother to look. It's the only time the initial experience was so bad I left before the service. I didn't even want to find out what happened when they passed the peace in worship. I left, but have never forgotten that experience.

Whenever I visit a church alone, I'm a little leery when I see that their service includes passing the peace. I think, I wonder what this one will be like. Mostly I've been ignored in the corner; or I've stood and watched other people be friendly to each other; but my "favorite" of bad examples are the ones when someone comes toward me, they reach out their hand but they're so concentrated on getting to the person they really want to greet, they shake my hand but don't look at me. It's a passing of the peace that focuses primarily on getting past you and on to someone else they'd rather greet. But then it's time for coffee hour. That's really when being left alone hurts even more.

The exception is Irving at St. Andrews United Church in Toronto. If you can believe, Art and I visited that church once five years ago and we still remember both his name and the name of the church!? As the service was ending, Irving came up to us and asked us to join him for coffee. He didn't say "do you want to go to the coffee

Sermons from Park Hill: June 15, 2008

hour," to which we could have said "no." He asked us to join him as his guest. But we expected him to take us there and show us the line and then leave us to ourselves. But he was interested in us. He introduced us to other people but not so he could pass us off. We weren't usually in Toronto on Sundays so we couldn't attend worship again, but on future trips, whenever we walked past the building, it always felt like that was our church.

Now this may sound like an admonition from the pulpit to pay attention to visitors and maybe give you a top ten list of rules and etiquette. I even toyed with the phrase, "It's quality, not quantity." But the impulse to even bring this up came simply from reading the text about Abraham and his extravagant welcome of the strangers whom he treated as honored guests.

Two weeks ago our Bucket Committee – the group of church members who have been meeting to address such things as marketing, web sites, and hospitality – met with Hal Youngblood from the Rocky Mountain Conference. Hal advised us to stop welcoming visitors. And begin preparing for our guests. If you think about it, you're often not ready when a visitor stops by. But you're always prepared when you expect guests. And we should expect guests if we've been inviting people and telling our story, not visitors stopping by unexpectedly. If we open the doors of the church on Sunday, guests will come. Have we all prepared ourselves? Do we feel honored that they came? Would you ever let a guest fend for him or herself? If you want it, there's some coffee over there... A host is attentive and more concerned for their guests than anything or anyone else. In fact, a real friend won't mind that you are busy caring for your guest. If you are new

to this church, "Welcome home! We've been expecting you."

Hospitality isn't just about someone else. The Host of the Universe welcomes all of us home and has set a feast in front of us to be shared with all nations. If you think about the place of the United States in the world, we've been pretty poor guests, hoarding all the food for ourselves and leaving some crumbs for those who arrive later. The abundance is there for everybody. And it's out of gratitude for that abundance that we share.

Let us be grateful and live out our gratitude in service to one another. Remember, once we were all strangers in a strange land, and now we have become friends and the guests of one another. That's the promise, so be patient if it isn't here yet – we have to all get ourselves together – but the big party is coming. That's it – the "p" I was looking for! A Promise, some Patience, and a big Party!