

August 26, 2007
Pentecost 13

"Hospitality to Strangers under the Oaks at Mamre"

GENESIS 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³ He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way-- now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." ⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." ⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. ⁹ "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." ¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

You never know what is going to happen to you when your name is Abraham even when you are 99 years old. The Lord your God called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Because of that call, every day is filled with surprises. Opportunities pop up when you least expect them.

It was a hot afternoon near the great oaks of Mamre. Abraham sees something off in the distance. His aging eyes focus on three strangers walking in the desert heat. He runs to greet them not as the great Abraham but as a man who was their servant. He welcomes them into his tent and personally serves them a sumptuous meal. What a surprise! One of the visitors who came to him was the Lord appearing in human form and speaking to him.

What if you could face each day of your life totally convinced that the Lord will give you numerous opportunities to show kindness and generosity to people, even total strangers? You can live this way. You have lived this way. You will live this way. You have something to share with people that they desperately need. Listen to the words of 1 Peter 2, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Let's take a closer look at this amazing hospitality under the oaks at Mamre to become

more convinced than ever that the Lord has called us to this place and this time. The Lord will give us opportunities to show hospitality to people, even strangers that come across our path of life.

The Lord gives opportunities for hospitality to every believer

Opportunities to show hospitality to people will pop up in our lives often when we least expect them. We are told, "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day." Moms and dads, the best opportunities to show kindness and love to your kids pop up when least expect them. Why do kids always ask so many questions when you are busy? Opportunities to help strangers always seem to come at the least opportune time.

Abraham could have taken the easy path. "I am 99 years old. It is the middle of the day and extremely hot. Who are those weird strangers traveling in the heat of the day? Maybe they are dangerous." Instead he hurried to greet them. Literally the Hebrew says he "ran." When was the last time you saw a 99 year old man run? The book of Hebrews says that he entertained these strangers unaware. Abraham was always eager to share his vast wealth with other people whether it was his greedy nephew Lot, or people who were captured in war, or total strangers who came to his tent. I think I am safe in saying that even wealthy philanthropists such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet cannot hold a candle to Abraham's generosity with people. Behind every act of kindness was always the great joy and hope of sharing the name of the Lord, the Lord who promised a Savior to bless all people.

How do we interact with strangers who come across our path of life here on the Central Coast? Look at the example of Abraham. He meets these strangers and bows to the ground as if he is their servant. He pleads with them to come under his care, wash their feet, rest under the mighty oak trees at Mamre and enjoy a little morsel of food from his hand. What humility! A little morsel of food? That is not what you received when you were a guest at the home of Abraham and Sarah. No bragging and boasting here.

Abraham hurried to get some food together. Again the Hebrew word used here is "ran." He calls on his wife Sarah, the princess, to personally take barley, grind it into fine flour, knead it and bake it into bread. A hundred servants could have done the task, but he wants it done right so he asks Sarah to take charge. He personally selects a choice tender calf from the herd, no scrawny goat or sheep. He brings out curds and fresh milk. Abraham does not even sit down with the guests. He stands next to them to personally serve them whatever else they might need. This past week I made the mistake of working on this sermon the same day that I had to fast in preparation for a routine check up. My mouth was watering as I thought of the fresh barley tortillas coming right off the fire, and succulent veal, perhaps roasted in strips over the open fire, yogurt perfectly cultured, fresh sweet milk. Abraham spared no effort to show hospitality to these strangers who came to him.

How do we show hospitality to strangers this week as we live our lives here along the Central Coast? Every day you will meet people traveling through this life in desperate need of someone to show them kindness, love and respect. Perhaps it is a friendly smile, a kind word, or even a willingness to help with some problem. Are we so busy and so preoccupied that we do not see the opportunities that stare themselves in our faces? Daddy, look at

what I made today in school? Have you ever ignored someone in your family who was looking for a little encouragement because you were too busy? It happens in our homes. It happens in school. Kids need other kids who show them kindness and respect. It happens at work. Are my time and my agenda so important that I do not see the opportunities that are before me? "Lord when did we see you hunger and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" You know the answer the King gave. "Whatever you did for one of the least of the brothers of mind, you did it for me." The least of the brothers, even totally strangers provide us with golden opportunities to simply love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, all flowing from the love that Jesus has for us.

You and I are certainly not as rich as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet or father Abraham. Yet we are very rich in the blessings the Lord has for us. Read Psalm 103. "Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, *bless* His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies." The Lord blesses you. He forgives you of your sin. He redeems you from the pit of destruction. He crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercy. You have so much to share with people. The Lord who knows every heart beat of your life brings people to you just as he did with Abraham.

This past week my wife gave me a blue ribbon from her school that says, "Who I am makes a difference." That is certainly true of all people. There used to be a bumper sticker that said, "Practice random acts of kindness." If we know who we are by God's grace as Abraham did, then we realize we have the potential to make a huge difference in this world because we have been called out of darkness into the light to show forth the praises of our God. We have a God who sent his Son Jesus to make the ransom payment for sin, to rescue people from eternal death, and give them the blessings of eternal life. The big Zaca fire will go out soon, but the fires of hell go on forever and ever.

The Lord uses hospitality to provide opportunities to further his kingdom

Abraham never realized how his acts of kindness and generosity would be used by the Lord to bless him and bless Sarah and bless the people around him, and ultimately the whole world. Before the strangers left they talked to Abraham. One of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Suddenly it becomes clear to Abraham that this stranger is no ordinary stranger. It is the Lord himself appearing in human form and telling him that the long wait for the promise to be fulfilled, the long wait of 25 years for a son to be born has now come to an end. Notice how the Lord says, "I will surely return." The Hebrew uses the same word for "return" twice to emphasize that it is a done deal. When the Lord says "I will" you can trust the same is true in your life. "I will help you, I will strengthen you, I will uphold you with my powerful right hand."

Sarah overhears the conversation that takes place outside the tent. Her immediate response is laughter, not the laughter of joy, but the laughter of ridicule or derision. The same word was used to describe how the Philistines mocked the mighty Samson after gouging out his eyes. Oh, to be sure, our dear Sarah, the beautiful princess, did not laugh

out loud. She chuckled to herself and thought to herself how utterly impossible this was to have a child when she was way past the age of the bearing children. Have you ever heard someone laugh out loud in derision when you talked to them about the virgin birth of Jesus? I have. Have you ever heard some make derisive remarks and even laugh at God's hand in creation? I have. Have you ever had someone laugh and ridicule God's plan to totally remove our sin and take our salvation in his precious hands? I have. Sarah did not do this but she laughed inside to herself. No one heard this laughing inside except the Lord.

Oh, dear Christians, we would not think of laughing out loud with a cackling, derisive laugh at what God's Word has said to us. And God forbid that we even laugh inside to ourselves at the things of God. We don't laugh but do we always give God's Word the respect it deserves? Is the Holy Bible always the precious book in our lives that it should be? Have we ever doubted the precious blood of Christ could cleanse people like us, especially when the hideous sins of our past loom up large to haunt us? Have we lost sight of the beauty of our baptism and felt sorry for ourselves even though through our baptism the Bible says we put on Christ? The Lord sees everything that goes on inside of us. Psalm 139 says, "The Lord knows our sitting down and our standing. He is thorough acquainted with all our ways." Because of what he knows about us, he has kept the promise he made to Abraham to send a Savior. "Lord I believe help my unbelief."

The strangers who came to visit Abraham had so much to say to Abraham and Sarah. The Lord reprimands Sarah for laughing. Then he renews the promise. "Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Oh, how often don't we want the Lord to reprimand us for thinking lightly the impossible he has done for us. We need to hear him repeat the promises again and again. Opportunities will come to you this week to show hospitality and kindness. With the Lord's help you may even have the opportunity share the name of the Lord, the Lord who fills your life with so many blessings. You are privileged to tell anyone who comes into your life about your God who has done the impossible, including rescuing people like us and like Abraham. Amen.