

Genesis 18:1-8 (NIV)

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 the finest 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.

Hebrews 13:2 (NIV)

² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

To be radically hospitable is to welcome guests as if you are welcoming God.

This is the first in a four part series on hospitality and, more specifically, on St. Andrew's key value of "radical hospitality." The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers the following attributes of hospitality:

- a. given to generous and cordial reception of guests
- b. promising or suggesting generous and cordial welcome
- c. offering a pleasant or sustaining environment

Those work for me. When someone comes to St. Andrew, do we greet them warmly, make a place for them, offer them help, make them feel welcome? Are we the sort of community to which people want to return because they got so much out of it the first time? Do we go above and beyond, offering some unexpected extra to all those who come? It is these sorts of questions we'll be asking ourselves in this series. We'll do so by looking at a number of biblical stories focused on God's mandate to his people that they were to be radically hospitable.

And we'll begin with some people who unknowingly welcomed God into their home and offered radical hospitality.

The beginning of the story

Nearly 2,000 years before Jesus, we meet a man named Abram.¹ He and his family live in Haran, far to the north of Canaan,² his father having moved there from Ur. One day, God speaks to Abram. There is no fanfare, no burning bush, no angels or flaming swords. Just a guy and the Creator of the Cosmos.

There is nothing distinctive about Abram. God could have chosen anyone through whom he would begin the restoration of all creation, but he chose Abram. Abram, later called Abraham, would become the father, the patriarch, of God's people.

God makes three promises to Abram and to his wife, Sarai (later, Sarah) when he comes to him that day:

1. God will give them a land.
2. God will make Abram's family a great nation.
3. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

There does seem to be one problem with God's plan. Abram and his wife are old . . . really old. Sarai is far past child bearing years. But, God promises them a family and it is a family they will get.

It is the third promise that gets forgotten and overlooked; yet, I couldn't really overstate its importance. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet. Such blessing will be brought to all the people of the earth.

Abraham and Sarah welcome God and his angels

But before the keeping of God's promises could begin its way to fruition, there must be a child, a child of the covenant between Abraham and God. This child will bear the sign of this covenant, circumcision. Because Sarah is much too old to give birth, she takes matters into her own hands and sends a servant girl in to get pregnant by Abraham; thus, he will have a son who can be the bearer of the promise.

But Sarah's scheme leads to nothing but heartache and ruin. The servant girl runs away, but returns to bear Abraham a son, Ishmael. Yet, the child of the covenant must be born to Abraham and Sarah, for that was God's promise. As this reality sets it, Abraham falls on the ground laughing at the very idea that Sarah could give him a son.

One day, three visitors arrive at the home of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham shows these men radical hospitality, even beyond what was expected in the day. He had a young, choice calf slaughtered and roasted for them. Abraham's finest flour is used to make bread for his guests. He brings out curds and milk for them.

And while the visitors eat, Abraham does not intrude or force himself on them. He stands quietly nearby. He is the perfect host.

And who are these visitors? The LORD and what are usually taken to be angels. The reader knows this, but not Abraham and Sarah – at least not yet. And the Lord reiterates the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah. That child will be Isaac, the father of Jacob.

¹Later in the book of Genesis, Abram will be given a new name by God. "Abraham" means something like "father of a multitude." The name of Abram's wife, Sarai, will be changed to Sarah. God changes Abram's name when God tells Abram that circumcision of male children is to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abram. In ancient cultures, a new name would signify a new phase in the person's life.

²Canaan is the ancient name of the land that would become the homeland of biblical Israel, given to them by God. Later, it would come to be called Palestine. The people living in this area in the time of Abraham were known as the Canaanites.

Little wonder that the writer of Hebrews urges believers to “show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (13:2). Two millennia after Abraham and Sarah, a rich man named Zacchaeus has little idea just who he is welcoming into his own home.

Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho, northeast of Jerusalem, and was a chief tax collector, a very rich man at the top of his chosen trade. Yes, in the eyes of fellow Jews he was an unsavory character or worse. But perhaps even that wasn't bad so far as Zacchaeus was concerned. We Americans, after all, have had a constant fascination with *la Mafioso*. Perhaps Zacchaeus enjoyed the notoriety or the feigned respect that his money could buy.

Tax Collectors

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, but the Roman tax system was nothing like our IRS. Rome would contract out the collection of taxes in geographic areas. The winning entrepreneurial bidder would agree to pay the contracted amount of taxes to Rome. The tax entrepreneur would then put together an organization to do the actual collection. The winning bidder would employ chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, who made the whole thing work. Zacchaeus would have employed lower-level collectors, like Jesus' disciple Matthew, who would man toll booths and other small tax collection businesses. It was one of the largest enterprises of that time.

In the Roman system, tax collectors would be free to collect all the money they could and keep whatever wasn't owed Rome under the contract. Thus, not only were they agents of the Roman oppressors, we can only imagine the methods they employed in gaining their wealth. Not surprisingly, in the Gospels, tax collectors are usually lumped in with the prostitutes.

One day, Zacchaeus hears that this Jesus from Nazareth, the talk of the town, is passing through Jericho. This little tax collector, for he was a short man, runs to catch a glimpse of Jesus even though it was most unseemly for a Jewish man to run. He was probably long past worrying about being unseemly. Zacchaeus even climbs a tree; something else unbecoming for a grown man. Perhaps because Zacchaeus has made such a spectacle of himself, Jesus spots him in the tree and, as was his custom, goes to Zacchaeus' home. In fact, Jesus even invites himself.

Can you imagine the joy Zacchaeus must have felt as he welcomed Jesus? What would this do for his reputation. Of course, the townsfolk didn't much like Jesus entering the home of the hated tax collector, but Jesus always seemed to hang around with the wrong sorts of people. Having invited himself into Zacchaeus' home, what happens next will be Jesus' miracle.

Zacchaeus asks nothing of Jesus, not even an answer to a question. He simply steps forward and, without prompting, commits to giving half of his ill-gotten possessions to the poor – not all, but half. Then, in keeping with the most stringent interpretation of the ancient Judaic law, Zacchaeus promises that he will repay four-fold those he has defrauded. Zacchaeus' repentance and generosity demonstrate that he is a “son of Abraham” (v. 9) He was lost, but now is found.

Notice that Jesus does not ask Zacchaeus to give up all he has. Nor does it seem that Zacchaeus abandoned his life to follow Jesus. Rather, Zacchaeus is redeemed *in* his life. He is transformed within the life he is living. By God's grace, Zacchaeus points his transformed life toward repentance and away from exploitation. He will be generous to the poor. He will make amends to those he has wronged. He will stay a tax collector, but he will now conduct himself with honor and justice. He will heed John the Baptist's teachings to tax collectors: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (Luke 3:13). Zacchaeus will “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). Even after giving away half of his wealth and making reparations, Zacchaeus would have still been a wealthy and powerful man. But now, he will use his wealth and power and talents for God's purposes. He will be a force for good, pointing others toward just and generous lives. . . . All this from the simple act of warmly welcoming Jesus into his home. Such a small thing; such a profound result.

Israel's Mandate from God: Radical Hospitality from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*

In the Old Testament, God gives his people a mandate to protect the rites of hospitality as part of its moral and spiritual covenant with him.

While all the peoples of the ancient Near East practiced hospitality toward strangers, the Israelites understood their participation in these practices in the light of their unique history as the people of God. Their traditional ancestor Abraham was a “sojourner” and stories of the traveling patriarchs and the Hebrews who were resident aliens in Egypt and wandering strangers in the wilderness are archetypal and prototypical: “For the LORD your God . . . executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and . . . loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:17, 19 NRSV; cf. Deut 26; 5-9; Ex 22:21; Lev 19:33-34). Israelite hospitality went beyond the merely customary and took its impetus from something other than fear of the stranger. It arose from the heart of a people whose identity and home rested in the God who had made them no longer strangers: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Ex 23:9 NRSV). Proper treatment of the stranger, then, was a just and grateful act in response to God’s loving provision (Deut 24:17-19) and revealed the character of God’s people.

Within such an ethos, breaches of hospitality were punished and the practice of hospitality rewarded. In the former category are the Ammonites and Moabites (Deut 23:3-4), the Benjamites (Judg 19:15, 18) and the churlish Nabal (1 Sam 25:1-13; 36-38). The rewards that come to those who extend ideal hospitality are even more noteworthy. Abraham and Sarah, who “entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2 RSV), were rewarded for their pastoral hospitality with the promise that their son would be born within the year (Gen 18:1-15). Abigail won herself a husband with her generous hospitality to David (1 Sam 25:14-35, 39-42). The widow at Zarephath who gave Elijah her last food was rewarded with a jar of meal and cruse of oil that did not fail until the famine was over (1 Kings 17:8-16). The Shunammite woman who made a cozy guest room for Elisha (replete with bed, table, chair and lamp) was rewarded with a son (2 Kings 4:1-17). Hebrews 11:31 attributes Rahab’s being spared when Jericho fell to her having “given friendly welcome to the spies” (RSV).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

There are some excellent resources online on the topic of Christian hospitality. The following are some questions to ponder and pray about that were written by Thomas Van Johnson of the National Ministries, American Baptist Churches USA.

1. Remember a time when you came as a stranger into an existing group and were fully welcomed. What was the spirit like within the group? What actions did the group members take to enable you to feel welcome? Write down key thoughts, actions, feelings, and attitudes that you believe contributed to the welcome.
2. Remember a time when you came as a stranger into an existing group and were unwelcome. What was the comfort level of the group, and what was your comfort level with the group? What actions communicated that you were unwelcome? Write down key thoughts, actions, feelings, and attitudes that you believe contributed to the sense of being unwelcome.
3. Based on these reflections, start your own definition of hospitality.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Leviticus 19:9-18, 33-37 God teaches his people what it means to love your neighbor.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Deuteronomy 10:12-22 God expects the best from his people, including their caring of strangers.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Joshua 2 The prostitute, Rahab, welcomes two Israelite spies and enables Israel conquest of Jericho.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Samuel 25 David is denied hospitality by the churlish Nabal.</p>
<p>Friday, Hebrews 13:1-8 Some final instructions from the author, including the call to practice hospitality.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

