

<Genesis 18:1-8; Psalm 119:137-144; Luke 19:1-10>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

[Singing:] *“Lord prepare me // to be a sanctuary. // Pure and holy, // tried and true. // With thanksgiving // I’ll be a living // sanctuary for you.”*

We had an ethos at camp, one that was never stated outright or determined through a strategic study. It wasn’t printed on letterhead, or even specifically taught to counselors during orientation and training. Rather, it simply existed, infusing the nature of the community that was formed each week, a connection that would last far longer than any given week of camp. In short, it was the ethos that ‘everyone belongs at camp.’

It is an ethos that remains intact to this day, that everyone who comes to Camp Duffield belongs there, and that nothing - including cost - should get in the way of someone coming to be there, to being part of the community that is formed...nothing should inhibit or hinder such belonging. It falls into the realm of hospitality, both how that is understood and how it is practiced, but at the same time such an ethos goes beyond simple hospitality.

For instance, the stories of our scripture readings this morning - Abraham and the angels passing by, and Zacchaeus seeking Jesus - could be interpreted merely as practices in hospitality. And that would not be an incorrect interpretation. We see that, quite literally, in the text.

Abraham, upon seeing travelers come past his encampment, does what is culturally expected of him: he greets them, offers them shade and rest, drink and food. He makes room for them. And Zacchaeus, likewise, when Jesus proclaims to him, “I must come to your house today,” does just the same. Coming down from the tree, he accompanies Jesus and goes a little ahead of him to ensure that the house is made ready, the table is prepared, and that the acts of hospitality will be offered. And in many cases, that much alone would be enough to set a good and welcoming tone.

And while I would certainly be one to caution against reading too much into a story from our scripture that is not made evident, I think these are cases wherein we might include a little bit of a deeper, more profound understanding. Because I don’t think these encounters offered to us today should be passed off merely as “good hospitality.” I do believe that there is more present, a deeper understanding to be explored.

We may need to allow some speculation on the part of Abraham’s intentions and understanding, but I think we can see it a bit more clearly in Zacchaeus’s response. More so, we do not need to stretch our imagination to see a deeper understanding present in Jesus’ declaration of invitation; it is reflected in many of his teachings and encounters. It is the understanding that to welcome any one, known or especially unknown, is to welcome God. It is the recognition that each and every person we

encounter carries within them a spark, an aspect of The Divine, that each and every person is created *Imago Dei*, in The Image of God.

Or as C.S. Lewis phrases it, “There are no ordinary people... You have never talked to a mere mortal” (*The Weight of Glory*).

When we recognize that every one, each and every person, is created in God’s image and carries the presence of the Divine, we recognize that each and every person belongs - belongs to God, belongs to the Table, belongs to the community of Christ. And in this recognition a deeper, more abiding degree of hospitality becomes manifest, shaping and reshaping the very nature of community around us and, eventually, the very nature of the world itself.

I would argue the case that Abraham understood this, and that it guided his practice. It was not just a matter of external practice for the benefit of others, though that exists as well, but it was also a practice for Abraham, a way of living his faith that he desired to be the benchmark for himself. Hospitality, to such a degree, becomes a two-way street, not just offered for others but allowed to shape one’s own self, as well. Regardless of the situation of the world, in this manner, it determines and defines our very selves as a living embodiment of the nature of belonging characterized in the Kingdom of God.

We see this two-way movement in Zacchaeus, as well, and perhaps a little bit more clearly exemplified. Much is made of the focus of Zacchaeus to welcome and receive Jesus, to show hospitality when it is asked of him. But while this receives much of the initial attention, it is not where Zacchaeus himself begins. Rather, Zacchaeus begins in a state of desiring to see Jesus, to hear Jesus, and presumably, to respond to whatever Jesus would have to say and offer him. The encounter begins with Zacchaeus trying so hard to see Jesus that he throws appropriate behavior to the side and runs ahead of the crowd to climb a tree and draw closer.

Zacchaeus’s eagerness to live into hospitality - his “hospitable-ness” as some phrase it - opens the door for Zacchaeus to receive what he earnestly yearns for - connection with Jesus - and to realize what Jesus hopes for him - a life transformed and a greater realization of God’s Kingdom.

Likewise, our practice of hospitality is not bound up only in who or what we are willing to welcome, but is also bound up in what we are willing to receive, what we are willing to hear Jesus say to us, and to be open to where it will lead us. Notably, it will lead us deeper into connection, deeper into community, deeper into the fullness of the Kingdom of God lived out in our world.

This belonging remains a hallmark of the Kingdom of God, and it is manifest in the connection we have with one another. As Glen Bell puts it, “To belong is to recognize that we exist - and find our existence - only in relation to others... One of the central claims of the gospel message is that we do not belong to ourselves...”

it entails ‘being-for-each-other,’ entering an ecology of belonging that crosses time and space. Belonging, in this sense, is generational” (*Pathways to Belonging*, xxi).

This ethos is manifest not just in what we say or what we do, but how we understand ourselves and who we are at our core. It calls upon us to both practice welcome and hospitality, and to receive the calling of Christ to lead us forward. Abraham practiced this, and found that he was both to be blessed and to be a blessing to the future people of God. Zacchaeus practiced this and found that not only was he going to draw closer to Christ, but that through him and his developing practices, Christ would draw close to others. And at Duffield, we continue to take to heart the plea of that song, that we would be prepared and made into a living sanctuary, a community of welcome and belonging, that we may entertain angels and the beloved of God.

How will we, as this community of faith here at Clarence Presbyterian, receive this calling to hospitality, and how will we, in the ongoing welcome of the Kingdom of God, entertain others and practice welcome? As we begin to look ahead to the Advent promise, and as we remember in this day those of our generations who have gone before us and welcomed us, in turn, this is no idle question, but is the echo of Christ’s calling through the ages. May we receive, and live into, this calling that has been placed before us. May we become living sanctuaries, ourselves. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*