

What extravagant welcome looks like
Genesis 18:1-15
June 18, 2023
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My father Jack Creilly was passionate about helping people, all kinds of people. Most of it was tied to the medical field. He was a naval nurse in the Korean Conflict, an ambulance driver, a fire chief, a trainer of paramedics and salesperson of radio equipment to fire and police departments. What made him good at all those various jobs was his deep love and curiosity of people. He made friends wherever he went. He saw the best in people and believed that everyone deserved dignity and his full attention. Because of it, he also had a very diverse circle of friends that I often saw growing up. The joke in our family was “what does a Jewish person, a divorced Presbyterian and an agnostic have in common? Jack Creilly. This joke referenced my father’s three closest friends. The ones I saw regularly around the house and at family events. These three men and others became my fill in fathers after my dad died.

Being a fire fighter is a lifestyle really. You are always ready to dash off at the first tones you hear. Tones that tell you someone is in trouble. As a firefighter are trained to always step in and try to help. So naturally my father also became the neighborhood handy man for many of our neighbors. Growing up we had a riding lawnmower that could be converted into a powerful snowblower with a 4-foot-wide attachment. My dad could clear our driveway in fifteen minutes with that blower. Soon he was offering to also do several of our neighbor’s driveways too. Us kids were recruited to follow behind and shovel the sidewalks and edges. When my brother John was old enough, he and I took over responsibility of these tasks that quickly became a little business for the kids. We learned the meaning of hard work but most of all we learned about caring for others who needed the support of acts of kindness.

My father’s kind and caring personality garnered much respect and loyalty from a wide group of people across the upper Midwest. Upon my father’s passing when I was

sixteen, my family heard even more stories of the ways my father befriended and supported people, especially those who experienced prejudice from others. One story that helped me understand my father's strong sense of loving the stranger and outcast came from our family lawyer Milt Bix. He shared this story from my father's early childhood in Milwaukee. My father was teased and picked on by other kids for being Irish-American growing up. The family did not take it too seriously at first, when it was just verbal teasing. That all changed when a brick came through the front window with a note telling my grandfather to go back to where they came from. This was too much for my Grandfather and they soon moved to Cedar Rapids Iowa. Milton pointed out that this brush with discrimination garnered my father's deep sense of justice and love for all people. Together my father and Milt fought corruption and antisemitism in the community for many years.

I share all this as a way of showing a different kind of hospitality. In today's context when we think of hospitality we may think of extravagant parties, simple acts of kindness and in many ways a form of entertainment. Inviting friends and powerful people together to celebrate a common interest. We even have full industries developed around the concept of extravagant hospitality. So when we look to the Bible and stories of hospitality like today's reading we may not recognize a difference between them.

In the time of Abraham, living in a semi-nomadic lifestyle, one relied on the hospitality of others to survive. So, when these three strangers showed up at Abraham's tent it was a unique opportunity for him to show hospitality to them. The law of hospitality among desert peoples was an obligation to be hospitable and welcoming strangers as a lifesaving gesture. Being welcomed into one's tent or compound meant you were fed, cared for, and protected if attacked. Today such commitment to care for the outsider as a means of protection is lost to many people. In today's reading Abraham goes far

beyond the basic minimum need of hospitality offering them not only bread and water but a whole feast.

As the host you took a risk of being robbed or even killed for your belongings and yet it was expected by desert tribal law that if people came asking for lodging or food you were obligated to provide for them. There are many stories both in the old and New Testament that talk about these cultural norms of caring for strangers in your midst. If you read my article this week in the church Eblast you'll find other references to such stories. I encourage you to go back and look at that.

In today's story God comes in the image of a stranger as an illustration of the unexpected blessings that can come from encountering and caring for strangers in our midst. Throughout scripture we can find examples of God using strangers as unexpected blessings. Encountering strangers can bring out the best or the worst in people. Jesus when he sends his disciples out to proclaim the good news the disciples are instructed to be dependent upon the kindness of others. They were instructed to not take any provisions but to seek out shelter and care from a household. If it was an open and caring household their blessing and peace would be received back to them. But if they experienced hostility and rejection, they were instructed to shake the dust off their feet and go on to the next town. (Matthew 10 or Mark 6)

In today's story we see Abraham receive the strangers and wait upon them. We do not know all that they talked about but clearly, they know through their conversation that Abraham and Sarah are hoping to have a child. The strangers bring an unexpected word of promise and blessing upon Abraham and Sarah.

Sharing a part of our lives with a stranger can also bring unexpected blessings and insights. When we open up our hearts and lives to strangers in conversation and friendship, we receive a different perspective on our lives. If you know the back story to this point in Abraham's story you know that they have been waiting for nearly 25 years

for a fulfillment of God's promise to have an error. Abraham and Sarah out of frustration or lack of faith offered Hagar as a substitute to Sarah for bearing a child for Abraham. Now these strangers come and unexpectedly clarify for Abraham and Sarah God's intentions that she too will bear a child. The unexpected nervous laugh that Sarah and Abraham express Reveals their struggle to take God at his word.

Sarah, in disbelief, laughs at the promise the visitors give Abraham, but that laughter of mockery turns into true joy when Isaac is born to them less than a year later. Sometimes the words of a stranger feel naïve or hard to accept, but often times their insights prove to be true and wise.

Sometimes we need a stranger to re-affirm what we already know God is calling us too. Another example of this comes from the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They too like Abraham struggled to fully understand God's promises in the face of unexpected setbacks. Jesus comes in that story again as a stranger opening and revealing and underscoring the promises of God to the disciples.

The meaning of hospitality in God's world challenges us to be open and vulnerable to the unexpected blessings they bring. It also challenges us to be ready to protect or defend those that others seek to keep out. And finally, God often speaks words of insight to us that we may otherwise may struggle to hear and receive.

May we be a blessing to the strangers we meet along life's journey and discover the extravagant love of God between us.