

“Do You Like to Entertain?”
Genesis 18:1-8/Luke 10:38-42
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³⁸Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A little over a month ago, I was at Pawley’s Island with my family. One night, after coming home from an outing to the Hammock Shops and dinner over in Murrells Inlet, we found ourselves sitting in the swings and rocking chairs under the house. And of course, we pulled out our phones. I started scrolling Instagram and saw that the International Space Station was going to be crossing over South Carolina that night at 9:07pm. So, at 9:00, we pulled our kids away from their Netflix shows and walked out onto the boardwalk that leads from the house to the beach. And there we waited. We could feel the ocean’s spray as waves met the shore, see flashlights bobbing on the beach, hear the shouts of those on ghost crab hunts, and spy the bonfires down toward Litchfield. No other houses nearby seemed to have people out looking on the porches and boardwalks. **Did they not know what was happening?** We turned our eyes to the northwest sky and waited. Where was it? It was definitely 9:07 and visibility was only going to last for 6 minutes before the glow of the space station was lost as it passed into the shadow of the earth. Suddenly, a small, but bright and distinctive light appeared, moving steadily across the sky. It was wondrous and ordinary, all at the same time. I savored the moment with my family. Kids in their pjs, salt brine on the air, love binding us together. But then, we were brought back to reality as the shouts of the family behind us crab hunting reached our ears and Mary Eliza proclaimed she was going to finish her show. Before we knew it, the light had disappeared. Just as quickly as it had come. And I found myself wondering, do all these other

people not know? Do they think it's just another star? Or a plane headed somewhere... Or maybe they never noticed it at all...

Something similar happens in our Old Testament story for today. When Abraham sees the three visitors arrive, he doesn't necessarily know who they are or why they are there. But he welcomes them anyway. This was actually also our Old Testament reading a few weeks ago when Ben preached on Open Minds Open Hearts. But he focused more on what happened when Abraham's wife, Sarah, came out to greet the visitors. I want us to focus on Abraham – his reaction to their arrival, his gracious welcome, and the no questions asked approach to hospitality. Don't you see? **Abraham could have missed it.** The visitors, I mean. He could have missed them. Or he could have dismissed them. Or he could have half-heartedly, hurriedly, harshly served them. But that was taboo in his culture. Back when people wandered in the desert and lived in tents. When someone showed up, you were their option for hospitality. There was no McDonalds or Starbucks around the corner. No public library with a water fountain and restroom. When the author of Hebrews exhorts Jesus' followers to extend hospitality at the beginning of chapter 13, they reference Abraham's story saying, "some have entertained angels without knowing it." **Some have entertained angels without knowing it.** Thank God Abraham's posture of hospitality.

When I was in high school our Sunday School class did a month-long in-depth study of spiritual gifts. One aspect of this study was a spiritual gifts inventory that we each completed. It was well over a hundred questions and back in the year 2002, it was on paper, not online. So, we spent one class answering the questions and another tallying our results. The inventory featured questions like *"I tend to use biblical illustrations to explain things."* *"I identify with people who are hurting."* *"I prefer serving others rather than being served."* We answered the questions on a numeric scale from 1-5 with 1 being almost never true and 5 being almost always true. At the end of our tallying, my top spiritual gift was "encouragement" while my best friend, Rachel's, was "hospitality".

Twenty years later, Rachel continues to excel at and cultivate her gift of hospitality. When we were in a college campus ministry group together, she could always be found in the kitchen cleaning up or making a sweet treat to share with everyone. Nowadays she and her husband throw the best parties. If they were ever featured on the formulaic but addictive show "House Hunters" they would

definitely go for the huge open concept home with the great backyard, perfect for entertaining. Their current house has an in ground trampoline and literal basketball court for the whole neighborhood to enjoy. Even when they say dinner won't be included, their appetizer offerings are delicious and generous and result in a meal. Children's birthday parties often last late into the night at their house because they make everything so fun and welcoming that no one wants to leave. So they loan pajamas to other kids and set up air mattresses where they can sleep while the adults stay up late into the night talking, having a dance party, or limboing away in the backyard. Back when Prince Harry and Meghan Markle got married in 2017, she threw a "Royal Wedding Watch Party" that started before dawn, complete with scones and clotted cream, home-made fascinators and decorations. Their tailgates are epic and not to be missed. At Christmas-time she invites all her closest friends and their children over for a craft afternoon where she also has a personally selected gift for every child wrapped and under the tree. When she comes to my house for dinner she always brings her homemade chocolate covered pretzels as a treat to be enjoyed after they leave. Rachel has a gift for hospitality and her Christian faith greatly informs it.

When I hear the word hospitality, images come to my mind...

Of parties at Rachel's house. Of the consummate host or hostess – like real life Martha Stewart or Jay Gatsby of literary fame. Of Abraham choosing a tender calf for his visitors or the biblical Martha bustling about to serve Jesus. These images both comfort me and, to be honest, intimidate me. You see, I'd choose the medium sized house on House Hunters that is okay for small parties, but nothing out of this world. Hospitality in that sense doesn't always come naturally to me. I'm not the one drawn to help someone clean up after a feast or to always have my pantry stocked with staples for the perfect meal just in case someone stops by and joins us for dinner. Hospitality like I've described thus far is wonderful. Those who possess that spiritual gift are needed and valued in our world. But I also think that we can broaden the notion of hospitality a bit. Hospitality isn't just about entertaining large groups in your home or welcoming strangers for a meal. It is about having an open and welcoming approach to life. Notice that Jesus doesn't condemn Martha when she voices her complaints to him. He just says that Mary has chosen the better part. Martha's part isn't bad. Her hospitality in preparing and cleaning and doing was probably very important to the success of Jesus' time in her home. But so was Mary's. The hospitality of paying attention to your guest, of listening to them, or showing interest in their life and what they have to offer.

There are also surely times in Scripture when Martha's part might be considered the better part. Think about the wedding at Cana from John 2 when Jesus' miracle is centered on the hospitality offered in food and drink. Or the Last Supper when unnamed saints prepared an upper room and a meal for Jesus and his disciples to enjoy. A meal that literally transformed the world.

Hospitality is defined as *"the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers"*. That's a broad definition. And it doesn't just describe my friend Rachel or the biblical characters of Abraham at the oaks of Mamre or Martha when Jesus came to visit. This definition of hospitality could include limbo games in the yard, a simple meal made from pantry staples, an elaborate feast with multiple courses, the offer of a clean bathroom to use, a glass of water, clear instructions for how to drop off your child on the first day of school, a team of helpers in brightly colored shirts on freshman move in day at college, the provision of nametags at an event so that folks can call one another by name, the full attention of someone as a friend tells a story, the gracious wave and a "how are you doing?" from a neighbor while on an evening walk.

Hospitality is one of our pillars here at Westminster. But it is also a core value of Christianity. It is one that Jesus taught about and embodied.

"Let the little children come to me."

"Daughter, your faith has made you well, be healed of your disease."

"You give them something to eat."

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

"This is my body which is given for you."

Hospitality **IS** bustling around in the kitchen and being a gracious host. **But it is also more than that.** It is a posture toward life that taps into who Jesus is and how he wants us to be in the world. It is an awareness of what is going on. Of who is present before you and what their needs are.

There's a great children's book that I had never heard of until my children received it as a gift when they were younger – "If Jesus Came to My House" by Joan Thomas. It features the voice of a little boy with a beautiful, poetic cadence. What if Jesus knocked on my door, the boy wonders. Would they be the same age? Would he share his best toys with him? Make him a cup of tea?

If Jesus came to my house,

*and knocked upon the door
I'm sure I'd be more happy
than I've ever been before.*

*I'd offer him my rocking chair –
it's such a comfy seat –
and at the pleasant fireplace
he'd warm his little feet.
My kitten and my puppy dog
would sit beside his chair,
and they would be as pleased as I
at seeing Jesus there.*

I love this book with its whimsical illustrations and its precious words and cadence. My children have almost outgrown it, but I have appreciated the way in which it cultivated within their hearts and lives a hospitality for Jesus. But most of us in this sanctuary today are beyond this book, too. We've outgrown it. And living as a Christian who values hospitality isn't just imagining how we would welcome Jesus into our lives. **It is imagining how we would welcome those God has put into our paths in the name of Jesus.** We must replace Jesus with those we encounter each and every day. We must treat others like we would treat Jesus.

And Christians who value hospitality individually are then called to practice hospitality communally. So how can we live hospitality out together at Westminster? How can we approach the Augusta Street area, the greater Greenville community, our neighborhoods, our mission partners with a posture of hospitality? What does that look like?

Just last week, one of our youth parents posted something about this on her story. **"Yes!!! Build a "U"** she captioned it. And this is what the post said, *"Circles are great if you are on the inside. They can be fun if you're in one, but circles can be awfully cruel if you're left on the outskirts, looking for a way to get inside. They can be exclusive. They can be excluding. They can be exhausting. They can be cliquish. They can be childish. They are far, far too common. Stop building circles and build a U. Leave room for everyone. Make a way so anyone, any 'you' can walk up and feel like they have a place to stand."*

Wow! Build a U. That's how we can do it. That's how we can live with a posture of hospitality in the world, both individually and as a church. When we build a U there is room for Rachel's hospitality and Martha Stewart's and Jay Gatsby's and Abraham's and Mary's and Martha's. There is room for yours and mine. You know, all those years ago, I didn't think hospitality was a spiritual gift that I possessed. And a certain kind of hospitality still isn't something that I am most gifted at. **But as a follower of Christ, I am called and equipped to practice hospitality in my own unique way.** And so are you. And so are we. Let's open up that U and let God show us how.

You know, Abraham could have missed it. Maybe he almost did. But the Bible tells the story of him not missing it. Abraham was able to open his arms, in a great big U, and entertain those angels in his midst. And look what came of it. Life. Joy. The continuing story of God's covenant grace. We could have missed the International Space Station that night at Pawley's Island. And we never would have known what we missed. Wouldn't that have been a shame? You know what I found out later? Up there, that night in the space station were Americans, and Russians, and Japanese. What a model that is for the world. I wonder, were those astronauts up there, functioning as a U? Approaching one another with a posture of hospitality? I bet they were. Because I don't think you have another choice when you're living communally, up in space, in small quarters. You have to be open and considerate and welcoming, or it would be a miserable journey.

Y'all, let's not miss it either. Together, let's help each other approach the world and our neighbors and one another with a posture of hospitality. Let us take the time to figure out how we can be hospitable Christians, in our own unique ways. And let's talk about it with one another so that together we can create a U where are welcome and have what they need. And when someone asks, "Do you like to entertain?" say "Yes! Come on in...to my home, my heart, my life, my church. You are welcome here."