

“By the Oaks of Mamre...”
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Christian Hospitality

Have you heard about the man who owned and operated a little general store? He was a devout person who took his Bible study very seriously. In fact, he was so dedicated that he developed a little game to play with himself. For any experience he happened to encounter in the store, he would seek to come up with an appropriate scripture. In this way, he kept himself sharp.

For example, one day a little boy came into the store to buy some candy. As the owner was ringing up the sale he quietly closed his eyes and said, “suffer the little children to come unto me.” A bit later a man entered the store – a man who had obviously run into some hard times. His clothes were torn, he was filthy and there was a peculiar odor which announced his presence about 30 seconds before he arrived on the scene. “Please sir,” he begged. “I have no money and haven’t eaten in two days. Can you spare a simple loaf of bread?” This gentle spirited man, being the person that he was, acted upon his faith and gave the hungry man not only a loaf of bread but some other necessities as well. And as he was ringing “no sale” on the register, he prayerfully said to himself, “Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth.”

But then something happened that surprised the kind owner. A patron of some means stopped into the store. He was pulling a trailer with his prized horse and he was seeking a new blanket for the animal. “Sir,” the owner said, “I have just what you want. You will be very pleased.” Going into the storeroom he emerged with a beautiful blue blanket. “How much?” demanded the gruff customer. “Why sir, this blanket is only \$10.00.”

“\$10.00?!? You’ve got to be kidding me. I wouldn’t put that rag on my horse. Haven’t you got anything better than that?”

“Yes sir, I do. Just excuse me for a minute and I’ll get it out of the back.” He returned to the storeroom and found an identical blanket but in green. Returning to his customer he said, “Sir, this is probably more suited to your fine taste. But it runs \$25.00.” Again the man wasn’t satisfied. So the manager returned to the storeroom one more time and emerged with the same blanket only it was bright red. “Sir,” he said, “this is my best blanket. But I’m afraid it will cost you \$100.00”

“Now that’s more like it,” the wealthy man said. “This is what I’m talking about. This is worthy of my horse. I’ll take it.” He then threw down a crisp new \$100.00 bill and left. And as the owner of the store rang up the sale he closed his eyes once more and quietly said to himself, “He was a stranger, and I took him in.”

Well, this isn't exactly what Jesus was talking about when he spoke these words in the 25th chapter of Matthew. No, his words were carrying a much more genuine message referencing the ways we serve him when we serve each other. **"I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in..."** And in describing these qualities of compassion Jesus went on to say, **"as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me."**

When you come right down to it, this is what Christian hospitality is all about, isn't it? But it feels like we are living in a world which is losing touch with these sensibilities. This concept of hospitality is tough to embrace in a day when we find it difficult to trust the strangers among us.

Think about it... what messages do we deliver to our children? *Be very careful, we say, never get in a car with a stranger... don't take candy from a stranger... don't talk to strangers... be careful of people you don't know...*

We don't like to place this kind of distance between our children and the people around them but we have no choice. We have to teach them caution in our efforts to keep them safe. Sadly, there is danger lurking and our little ones must be protected.

In a very real sense, we're all living on the edge. We want to remember the days when kids were out playing from sunup until sundown. There was rarely a worry because the neighborhood watched over all the kids and there was a comfortable sense of security. But this reality has gone away and it's a different day. We aren't as open to each other as we were once upon a time. In an attempt to be secure and safe, we have withdrawn into our circles of comfort in an effort to keep the stranger at bay.

There is a word that has entered the lexicon that describes this kind of behavior. It's "cocooning". It emerged back in the 80's. Simply defined, cocooning is a way to control our environment and to better protect ourselves by drawing in upon ourselves and creating small, secure enclaves. Because fear is a common reality today, it's a logical response.

For example, how many cities do you know that are safe at night? Research has shown that for the first time in history, the wilderness is safer than civilization. Urban violence and terrorism are new ways of life to which we are learning to adjust. Many folks are turning their homes into fortresses. Gated communities with promises of security are growing rapidly. And of course, there are always the entrepreneurs who are figuring out how to make money off of our insecurities. Did you know you can now purchase an "urban scarecrow" named Gregory for just \$375. No, you don't put Gregory in your garden. Rather you put Gregory who has a muscle bound fiberglass body next to you when you are driving alone or by a window in your home when you are out. His tough demeanor will scare away any possible intruders.

Or what about shopping? Out of curiosity I googled some shopping statistics this week. In 1980, mail order sales amounted to \$2.2 billion. In 2007, that number picked up a bit. According to the May, 2010 census, e-commerce (as it is now called) accounted for nearly ½ of the sales made in the U.S. totaling \$106,821,000,000.

No wonder so many shopping malls are going out of business. These places of gathering and shopping used to bring a sense of community to life but it's now going away. People are leery of being out at night alone. Even the famous Mall of America is showing signs of suffering because of security issues.

Then there is something called e-commuting. Because of technology, people can often avoid the traffic and the expense of travel and work out of their own homes. You can sit at your computer in your PJ's drinking coffee and no one is the wiser as long as you are producing. Of course there is a price to be paid. Once again, relationships are hampered.

You get the point, I'm sure. Our culture is changing dramatically and it will continue to evolve and morph more rapidly as we move forward. And in the process, it has made it more difficult for people to enter into meaningful, secure relationships. In short, hospitality has taken a serious hit in the modern way of living. And that leads me to believe that this angst people are experiencing... this lack of trust that has mushroomed has got to be addressed for our common well being. And to me this suggests that more than ever the church has a role to play that is foundational to the survival and stability of our society.

To be sure, this call to hospitality isn't new. The Bible is filled with examples. This morning's lesson is a classic illustration. Abraham was quite a character. You will remember that he was called by God to leave behind the life to which he had grown accustomed in order to venture out toward a new and promised land. You might also remember that this was the first faithful step taken toward the founding of Israel. And was it ever a challenge.

In his desire to be obedient to God, Abraham found himself journeying in lands he didn't know and settling with strangers through whom he was often intimidated. Yet he was driven. And one day when he was in a foreign place with no security save his faith, three strangers appeared seemingly from out of nowhere. And did you notice what Abraham did?

He put his fears aside and took them in. He met them, washed their feet as was the custom of the day, granted them relaxation, and gave them food before they continued on their way. Little did he know he was actually in the presence of the Lord.

Abraham models for us what we might consider a God-like response. He was in a very primitive way, the church. No, it wasn't yet organized or institutionalized, but through him the seed of compassionate response was sown and it would become an image to be repeated time and again throughout the Bible. You have the 23rd psalm in the Old Testament and wonderful parables like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and the Great Banquet (Luke 14) in the New Testament. They all capture this sense of generous compassion being extended to the stranger. And it's no coincidence that this vision of compassion came to life in the early church.

In fact, when you think about it this is exactly the context in which the early church flourished. It was frightening to be a Christian early on. In fact, it was downright intimidating. But in the face of their greatest fears, those early believers sought each other out to establish a sense of community and to feel a kind of spiritual connection. This gave them strength... and credibility... and confidence to be the people God wanted them to be.

People are no different today. We all need to experience spiritual intimacy. We were not created to walk alone through this world but rather to grasp each other's hands in an effort to lift and support one another. Yes, God created us to be here for each other... and for the stranger, too.

I would regret the day a stranger would walk through these doors only to become a victim of neglect. That would be unacceptable and in the eyes of God, a travesty. Remember what Peter said: **“Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”** (1 Peter 4:9-10)

You know, we are fast approaching a very special time. As we move through the summer and toward a new academic year, we must be mindful that this is a time of searching for many families. It happens more in the fall than at any other time. Why? It's an opportunity for new beginnings and many folks who have felt disjointed and empty... folks who have a hollow spiritual feeling are looking for connections. It isn't so much about theology dear friends... it's all about relationships. And I'll say it again... in an increasingly alienated culture we must realize that there is no one poised to do this better than the church. If only we have the will to touch and to change a wandering and wondering heart.

There is a beautiful line in the book of Hebrews. In the 12th chapter (verse 2) the author is remembering, I think, this great story of the morning related to Abraham embracing the strangers in the shadows of the oaks. Yes, as we pointed out he welcomed them into his tent, washed their feet, gave them rest in the shade, prepared a meal and graciously sent them on their way.

But before leaving, one of the strangers asked about Abraham's wife, Sarah, and in the course of their conversation the great patriarch suddenly realized he was standing in the presence of God. These men... these strangers were in truth, angels who had come to test him. And it's upon thinking of this experience that the writer of Hebrews says with a tone of mystery and awe, **“we never know when we have entertained angels unawares.”**

This writer was correct. We do need to be cautious. God is always and forever present. But it's just up to us to recognize him in the face of the stranger. Maybe the writer of the book of Revelation said it best when speaking of God... **“Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”** (Rev. 3:20) There is always a hungry stranger knocking. It's up to us to open the door. Amen and AMEN!