

HOSTING ANGELS...OR ANGEL HOSTS Genesis 18:1-15 Luke
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I suspect that many of us grew up in families where we got message: Food is love. Maybe it was a grandmother, an aunt, even a parent who communicated this message. In my family it was both my paternal grandmother and my mother who passed this on. At family gatherings such as Thanksgiving, the house was filled with the smells of roasting and baking, herbs and spices, sweet and savory aromas that enticed the senses, teased the palate, and drew you to the kitchen, wanting to see and taste and experience what was on the stove or in the oven.

Often my mother or grandmother would take some leftover pie dough, roll it out, press it into a potpie tin, sprinkle cinnamon and sugar, sometimes adding a bit of pumpkin filling or maybe some fig preserves and pop it in the oven for us kids. When it came out and cooled, we were called to the kitchen table where we could eat our snack and sit and enjoy the hustle and bustle of preparing a meal to feed anywhere from 9 to 21 folks.

In the South, making room at the table is a tradition. And tradition says, "if someone stops by around meal time, invite'em in and sit'em down to eat." I think Abraham would have made a good Southerner.

The Old Testament story we heard tells of Abraham inviting some strangers to rest and have some food. Ah sure, anthropologists tell us that the social rules of the desert demanded that the host offer water to quench the visitor's thirst, and a bit of unleavened bread for a snack. After all, that's

just being polite. But, somehow Abraham discerned that these visitors were more than typical travelers, more than just three strangers walking by the oaks of Mamre, stopping at an oasis for respite from the heat.

What would you do if it was late July, humidity over 90%, sun beating down like a bonfire, you're sitting on your front porch, fan running, a cool drink in your hand, and suddenly three strangers come walking up your driveway? (Ok, besides checking them out for what they might be packing, carrying, or selling!)

seemingly)

We know what Abraham did — he jumped up and ran to greet them! And, he invited them into the shade, offered water and a snack, like I said. But, then he went for the whole hog — er, I mean, calf. Not only did he get Sarah, his wife, to bake bread, he had a calf butchered and cooked. Spontaneous BBQ! On second thought, not only could Abraham be Southern he'd have made a good Texan...mmmm, beef brisket and ribs!

You see, Abraham understood that food is love. And the folks he was hosting were special, so much so that he wanted to show his love for them as if they were family.

Are we willing to treat strangers as family? Jesus said that when we see someone hungry we are to give them food; to the thirsty, something to drink; to the stranger, a welcome; to clothe the naked; to care for the sick; to visit the imprisoned. And when we do these things to the least of these who are members of God's family, we do it to Jesus himself. And through Jesus, we see and come to know God and God's love. It is because we

love our family, our Biblical family, that we show God's love for the world

Abraham discerned that standing before him were not three strangers, but three angels — perhaps God's own self in three persons. And so Abraham's hospitality overflowed. The writer of *Hebrews* makes the connection for us "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels..."

Perhaps we have entertained angels unknowingly. Perhaps we've missed an opportunity to extend hospitality to someone who needed to be recognized — not so much as an angel, but as one of God's own children. In this day and time, especially here in the USA, we have become more and more tribal. By that I mean, we are only willing to recognize, acknowledge, greet, welcome, embrace those whom we know and who are like us — who look like us, think like us, agree with us in all our opinions and actions. With the world changing so rapidly because of technology, climate, communication of research in behavior and health, all this drives us to "circle the wagons," to resist or deny the changes announced and those we see around us who are not like us because we're overwhelmed.

Our fears magnify to the point where our ability to discern God at work in the world becomes limited, stunted. We shrink our viewpoints down to what we think is the simplest: either the other person we encounter is with us or against us.

Even in Abraham's time, life was precarious. Remember, he had taken his extended family into a strange land on God's word to him that there Abraham would prosper. Any encounter with strangers was fraught with risk

as well as opportunity. Who does he trust? Who are these people? What does he do?

We have some of the same questions. We find ourselves less anxious when we know everyone in the room. Like the old sit-com, *Cheers*, we want to be in a place where everybody knows our name. But, not all are known to all; strangers walk among us — those whom you and I may not know. Still God's love is poured out from them. And, we who host them, eat with them, laugh with them, cry with them, love them know that our response should be, must be, generous.

And so, we are to pay God's love forward, as it were. Not just be the host to angels, but become an angel host — spreading the Good News of God's love, to bring the message of hope to others, to work to make God's kingdom visible to the world. We are not to hold it in, or hold it close, or, as the Bible says, to hide it under a basket. We are to hold this love up, to carry it out, and to offer it to everyone we meet — for who knows, they may want to join the angel host!

Let us pray: Holy God, You sent angels among us to remind us of Your love. You sent Your Son, Jesus, to make that love visible. Let us take Your love and spread it like flowers in a garden, like light on a hill, so everyone can see it. Let us be like angels ourselves, sharing Your love to all. Amen.