

9 Pentecost, Proper 11, Yr. C

July 17, 2016

Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15; Colossians 1:15-28

Hospitality is a major theme in today's readings, but so is the recognition of a time when critical decisions need to be made. And I think both of those themes are relevant this week when we've seen one horror after another and wonder how to respond. Extended hospitality and recognizing a time to act are certainly relevant to today's situation, so let's use those as ordering devices.

Hospitality is obvious in both the Luke and Genesis readings. And it's in the Genesis reading that we see hospitality and a kind of water-shed moment coming together.

So, Genesis. Strangers arriving. Often the first reaction to strangers is one of suspicion and hostility. It seems to be a natural human response that we have to work to overcome. The Bible, though, teaches a different way. In this Genesis reading, Abraham and Sarah greet three strangers, who turn out to be angels. When they greeted them and offered them hospitality, they were following the ancient custom of the desert. But they were also living out what the Bible often reminded people to do – to welcome the stranger among you and to remember that you were once strangers yourselves. The book of Hebrews refers back to this incident in Genesis and tells us not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers, “for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Perhaps it's from this passage that we get the idea that strangers could be bringing gifts. Because they certainly were doing so here – they brought the announcement that Sarah would give birth to a son. A critical juncture, I think – God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation and here we see that moment when the promise becomes a reality.

The theology of hospitality is just as valid today as it was then. In Henri Nouwen's book, *Reaching Out*, he describes the movement from hostility to hospitality as essential to our spiritual growth. But for him, as for biblical writers, hospitality means more than serving food and drink. It means that, of course, but at a deeper level, it means having an attitude of openness, welcome, if you will, toward those we regard as strangers and, indeed, toward all of life. When he wrote the book in 1975, Nouwen was concerned about our society which he said was “increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people...looking at the world with suspicion...always expecting an enemy to appear and do them harm...” I wonder what he'd say today. One would have to be living in a cave with blinders and noise-canceling headphones these days to miss the fact that those words are more true than ever. What do we, as Christians, do about it? Nouwen points out that our vocation is to turn enemies into friends, to move from hostility toward the stranger to hospitality. And it's interesting that the words are really close together – both are derived from the Latin - “hostis” is the enemy; “hospes” is the word for friend. But as close as the words are, it's clear how difficult it is to move from the one to the other. Partly that's because of our assumption that the stranger is a potential danger, but also because in our so competitive society, it's easy to see even colleagues as threats to our economic or intellectual safety. For Nouwen, hospitality is preparing a space to that people can encounter God's word. What can we do to make that happen? What do people need to really

hear God's word? Sometimes it's the physical stuff, like the injured man in the Good Samaritan parable. Sometimes it's attention, or companionship; sometimes it's acceptance and a place to belong; ALWAYS it's respect. That's what has to happen to create that hospitable place and to get there we have to be ready to set aside our fear, to see the other as bringing us a gift – maybe the gift of awareness, or insight or deeper understanding, or maybe even a bigger heart. We have to be able to suspend judgment – to give the stranger the benefit of the doubt. I think we all know how hard that is. And it's especially hard when we're surrounded by fear and anger and the rhetoric of hate. Social psychologists tell us that when any social group perceives a threat, whether that's the threat of violence or a loss of status, and whether the threat is real or not, that group will close ranks. And thinking shuts down in the face of that perceived threat. When that happens, we judge entire groups by the actions of a few. And, as former president George Bush said this week in Dallas, we “judge other groups by their worst examples while judging ourselves by our best intentions.”

But, be that as it may, as Christians, a different response is asked of us. We're called to see one another as images of God, as beloved of God, as, in the Colossians reading, as mysteries of those in which Christ has chosen to dwell. The same idea is picked up in the psalm: Do you want to dwell with the Lord? Ok, here's how to do it: lead a blameless life, do what's right, speak the truth from your heart, have no guile on your tongue, do no harm to your friend. And then there's that line, so applicable to today: The one who would dwell with the Lord, DOES NOT HEAP CONTEMPT UPON HIS NEIGHBOR.

So, how do we move forward; how do we come to see each other as God sees each of us? How do we get beyond stereotypes to some kind of understanding? First, I think, we recognize the pitfalls. We recognize all the biases and assumptions we're operating with – we take them out and really look at them. And then we try to really listen: listen to the pain and suffering that some in our society have been dealing with – and listen in a way that doesn't make excuses, or denigrate the suffering, or undercut its reality. In the Dallas case (and I can say it perhaps got my attention in a different way, because I had actually been on those streets) – it means that we understand the fear and frustration of police officers who, these days, have to wonder what will happen every time they make a traffic stop, let alone what will happen when they go into some really dangerous neighborhoods. And on the other side, we have to really listen to the pain and experience of African Americans subject to systemic injustice. Listen and then try to find a way forward, to reach across and bridge what divides us. In light of today's scriptures, to extend a real and deep and holy hospitality to one another.

But then, also in light of these scriptures and the need to recognize times when crucial decisions need to be made, we need to take stock of our common life and the direction in which it's going. Many of you know that I taught a Clearing class a couple of years ago about how Hitler was able to come to power. In the news this week, David Brooks had a column in which he began by saying that he never understood how that could happen but, now, he said, looking at our current situation, he does. Massive changes, dislocation, dispossession, loss of self-respect, a retreat to tribalism and a festering resentment upon which unscrupulous politicians can capitalize – all of that was present in the 1930's and we foster or ignore it now at our peril.

Commenting on recent developments, Brooks said that a cavity has opened beneath what we thought was the floor of our national life and “there are demons there.”

Is there hope? Surely the answer is yes. But it demands that we recognize and live out of our Christian vision. Perhaps the time is ripe for us to do just that. I read something posted by an African-American woman who lives in Andover, Massachusetts. She wrote:

“So this morning I went into a convenience store to get a protein bar. As I walked through the door, I noticed that there were two white police officers (one about my age, the other several years older) talking to the clerk, an older white woman, who was behind the counter, about the shootings that have gone on in the past few days. They all looked at me and fell silent. I went about my business to get what I was looking for. As I turned back up the aisle to pay, the older officer was standing at the top of the aisle watching me. As I got close, he asked me, “How are you doing?” I said, “OK, and you?” He looked at me with a strange look and asked, “How are you really doing?” I looked at him and said, “I’m tired!” And he said softly, “Me, too.” Then he said, “I guess it’s not easy being either of us right now, is it?” And I replied, “No, it’s not.” Then he hugged me and I cried. I had never seen that man before in my life. I have no idea why he was moved to talk to me. What I do know is that he and I shared a moment this morning that was absolutely beautiful. No judgments, no justifications, just two people sharing a moment.”

It’s what President Obama said in Dallas, when he counseled us to have hope and to reject despair, going on to say that he can speak out of his own experience about the goodness and decency of this country and its people. Paul would say that that decency springs from the Christ that is in each of us. That Christ who always both counsels and empowers us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Amen.