

## **The Hospitality News**

**Genesis 18:1-10a (and Luke 10: 38-42)**

**Home Moravian Church, July 20, 2025**

Each month, the local tourist information center called “Visit Winston-Salem” e-mails me the “Hospitality News.” It’s a list of upcoming events that people visiting or living in Winston-Salem might enjoy. July’s list includes, for example, the Sawtooth School for Visual Arts- Metal Clay Arts Symposium, the Winston-Salem Tennis Open, the Wake Forest vs. Kennesaw State Football Game, the Carolina Wedding Show, and a conference of the NC Gang Investigators Association.

What this newsletter tells me, beyond the fact that there *is* an NC Gang Investigators Association, is that these days, “hospitality” means creating special events and inviting people to attend them, often for a fee. And if those who attend these hospitable events require food and a place to sleep, well, restaurants and hotels will be hospitable as well. Like some other biblical imperatives (such as care for the sick), hospitality these days is coupled with the word “industry.”

Which is not to say that it’s a bad thing to be able to buy a place to sleep or a place to eat. We *need* those places. Traveling through today’s world, you certainly can’t depend on strangers taking you in.

In the days of Abraham, though, hospitality was not an industry. It was an imperative—a requirement of a righteous life. My favorite definition of a righteous life is a life that meets the demands of relationships. Hospitality is one of those demands of relationships, even relationships

that haven't begun yet—especially the ones that haven't begun yet. Relationships with strangers who may become your guests.

In today's story, relationship begins for Abraham "by the oaks of Mamre." That little phrase alone suggests an opportunity for hospitality: a shady grove in the desert, a place of relief and refreshment. Abraham is there, sitting at the entrance of his tent, just as you and I, before air conditioning, might have sat on the front porch. Maybe he's nodding a little in the heat of the day. How else could three travelers have drawn near without his notice? But when he looks up, he sees them, and relationship begins. The hospitality is *on*.

That moment when Abraham opens his eyes and notices the men near him? That is step one of biblical hospitality. To be hospitable, you have to notice that someone requires your hospitality. Step one is seeing. Noticing the strangers nearby.

Step two: "He ran from the tent entrance to meet them." Step two is, having seen, going out to meet. Abraham doesn't remain in place at his tent; he moves toward the strangers he has just now seen.

Now, since he's moving toward strangers, there's some danger in this step. Are the strangers allies, or are they a threat? Considering the possible danger, a lesser man might go toward them puffed up with the power of his position: If these strangers have a need, they are dependent on him.

But instead, Abraham moves to the third step of biblical hospitality: He humbles himself. Reaching the strangers, he bows down to the ground. And then, having put himself in the role of a servant, he moves to step four, the invitation: *Rest here, and let me feed you.*

His invitation accepted, Abraham moves to step five: providing. For this, Abraham enlists the cooperation of his household. Sarah will prepare bread. The servant will slaughter a calf and

prepare the meat. Then Abraham gathers what has been prepared and sets it before the guests; and then he takes a place at a little distance and simply stands by. He may, or may not be needed; he's waiting to find out. Though he may hear the murmur of the strangers' voices, he's not eavesdropping—that would be impolite. But he is listening for a need; listening for *their* invitation for him to be of help. Listening for a message, or a call. This is step six of hospitality: after providing, waiting, being present, ready to serve, standing by—listening for a call.

The lectionary pairs this Old Testament story with a New Testament story about a woman named Martha who welcomes Jesus into her home. You heard Keith read that story just a few minutes ago. Like Abraham, Martha works hard to provide for guests; but, unlike Abraham, she doesn't have the cooperation of her household. We're told that Martha is "distracted by her many tasks." Anyone who has ever hosted guests for dinner—which presumably is all of us—can imagine how hard she's working. All of us therefore understand why it irritates Martha that her sister, Mary, is not working with her; she's just sitting by Jesus' feet, listening. Martha gets so mad that she complains to Jesus, even accuses Jesus of not caring about her, and tells Jesus to tell Mary to help.

Putting these stories of Abraham and Martha side by side, I see something I haven't noticed before: Martha seems to have dived so fast and deep into step five—providing—that she missed step three: humbling herself. She may think of herself as a humble servant, but when she *tells* Jesus what to *tell* Mary, she's not being humble. She's being in charge.

Most of us in this room are probably used to being in charge of something, whether a job, a household, or perhaps a volunteer setting. "In charge" is a hard identity to set aside. It's a responsibility we take seriously, just like Martha did—and Abraham, too. It's not wrong to be in charge when you are called on to be in charge.

Of course, being in charge is hard work, and it can be a little frantic, as we learn from Martha's distress as well as from Abraham's story. The description of Abraham's providing includes a lot of words that amount to "hurry up." Abraham *hastens* into the tent and tells Sarah to *quickly* make cakes. He *runs* to the herd to select a calf, and the servant *hastens* to prepare it. Hours of work are narrated like a speeded-up cell phone video, happening in seconds, probably to the accompaniment of some zany music.

But after setting the food before the guests, Abraham retreats. Let the strangers decide how and what to eat; let the strangers steer the conversation; let the strangers determine whether there's anything else they need—in which case, Abraham will provide it. Meanwhile, he's simply standing by, humbly sharing the shade under the tree. Sometimes, the best thing a host can do is just humbly wait to see if he's needed.

Abraham has a little Martha in him, and a little Mary. When the situation requires him to be in charge, he works hard at it. And when the situation requires him to stand by, he stands by. Humbly. Quietly. I picture him as a non-anxious presence, there if needed, otherwise just enjoying the shade. Not inserting himself into the conversation, but listening for a call.

And a call of sorts will come: One of the men will make the very surprising announcement that Sarah will give birth to a son. This is very important news; indeed, it will change history. But when Abraham hears the news, all he knows is that it will change his life. And all he did was stand by and listen for the call. That's what makes him a little like Mary.

After directing all that work, was it hard for Abraham to just stand by in case he was needed? I think that standing by can be hard for people who are used to being in charge. We might feel like we've failed unless we're active, doing something we think is helpful, even if our help has not been requested. But taking charge in spaces that are not ours to be in charge of,

spaces in which we are invited guests, is not hospitable or righteous. It's presumptuous. It's proud. And it probably happens most often in the spaces where we need to be most humble: the opportunities to build relationships with those who are not like us.

Today Martha's blunder reminds me, uncomfortably, of times I've tried to be in charge in spaces that were not mine to be in charge of. In every one of those times, I was invited as a guest specifically to interact with people of different race, faith, culture, and background. In every instance, I was working hard to be, as I thought, helpful: giving answers, trying to manage the conversation, making suggestions about how the program should go. In every case, I was reminded, very clearly, that I was not in charge. And I needed to hear that.

Over recent years, discussions of race, culture, and diversity in our country have been challenging. But I also find them exciting. Painful as the process is, I feel like I'm unlearning a lot of what I thought I knew. Sometimes I think I know our history, and I'm wrong. Sometimes I think I know what's helpful, and I'm wrong. Sometimes I think I'm supposed to be in charge, rush in with my ideas of how to be helpful in someone else's space: again, wrong.

As I unlearn some things, I learn others. Reading about Abraham this week, I'm thinking how I need to learn the steps of biblical hospitality. Step one: seeing. Noticing the strangers nearby. Step two, moving toward them—but with, step three, humility. The humility to admit that I may not know a stranger's need. All I can do is offer an invitation.

If my invitation is accepted, I can do the work appropriate to meet the demands of this new relationship. And after the work is done, the next step is to stand by, like Abraham under the tree, and listen, like Mary at Jesus' feet. Listen in case there is a call.

I like to think of the church as an oasis: a place of relief and refreshment in a very big desert. Sitting at the entrance of this our tent, what strangers will we notice, crossing the desert?

Home Church has always worked hard at hospitality. It's a responsibility we take seriously. Let us also take that responsibility with humility, understanding when to take charge, and when to stand by—stand *beside*. Standing quietly beside, we might just enjoy sharing time in the shade with people who may become friends. Or we might hear a call that will change our lives.

And *that*, family of Christ, is today's hospitality news. Amen.