

## “Enthused for Welcome, Hospitality & Inclusivity”

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Text: Genesis 18: 1 – 8

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One of the major themes for the future of VAPC that arose from our annual meeting exercise is “Welcome / Hospitality / Inclusivity.” These were also major themes on the first Pentecost Day. 3,000 people were welcomed as new followers of Jesus. We read that the early church shared in fellowship, meals, shared their belongings, met needs—expressions of hospitality. And the new church was radically inclusive. These newcomers to faith included Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism, coming from as far away as Iran, north Africa, Turkey and Rome, coming with many different languages. Right from the beginnings of the church we see the Holy Spirit fostering a hospitality that welcomed one and all.

Radical hospitality was hard-wired into the Jewish faith since the very, very beginning. In the days of Abraham and Sarah, for example, it was an obligation of the culture, for a nomadic people who lived in a desert land. Travel in those days across a barren landscape was filled with threats to survival. So when strangers showed up at your tent, it was your responsibility to provide at least the basics of food and shelter. Because, who knew, next week that could be you needing hospitality. But the story of Sarah and Abraham’s hospitality goes beyond the norms of their day, and in their actions we can find practical lessons for this practice for our own day. For like on that first day of Pentecost the church is still called to welcome strangers and to incorporate them into the body of believers.

Hospitality starts with **noticing**. Our story says simply, “Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him”. Standing there in the noon day heat: exposed, tired, hungry, thirsty. They were strangers. And we read, “he went to them”. To act, you first have to notice the people and the need. I was about six years old when natural gas was made available in my home town. One blistering hot summer day I saw was a bunch of workers laying the pipeline. My ever-considerate mother, however, saw a group of hot, tired, thirsty men. So she made up a big pitcher of lemonade, filled with ice cubes, and sent me out with it for the workers. To this day I still remember the immense appreciation those guys had for my mother’s act of hospitality. She noticed people in need of an act of kindness. Every one of us can do the same, if we have the awareness that will notice the stranger in our midst.

Hospitality is about **inviting**. Abraham’s reaction to seeing these three strangers is noteworthy. We read, “he ran from the tent entrance to meet them”. Ran! So anxious he was to invite them, these strangers. Then we hear his invitation. “Please, do not pass by my tent just yet. Let some water be brought to wash your feet. Find rest under the shade of this tree. Let me bring bread for your hunger. But please, do not pass until I have served you”. We of Varsity Acres Church have many opportunities for invitation. About 40% of all Canadians claim to have some degree of Christian faith and yet do not

go to church. We have many simple occasions that people can be invited to, such as the Pancake Breakfast, a movie night, the intergenerational Advent event, to participate in a mission activity. Hospitality at church means not just being ready for when a stranger arrives, but also extending the invitation to come.

Hospitality is about **being generous**. Abraham simply and humbly offered his guests “a bit of food”, but then what did they actually do? Sarah made the bread from “choice” flour. Abraham took a “good and tender” calf from his own herd – an extravagant act – to serve his guests meat. This was not just an obligatory snack for passers-by they would never see again. This was a feast. Generous indeed. Generosity is about giving something of our own to another for their sake. Generosity, at some level costs us. But that cost doesn’t have to be great to be appreciated. Coffee hour is often a time when we reconnect with our friends we haven’t seen since last Sunday, and that’s important to us. But how much does it cost us to give of our time to introduce ourselves to someone we don’t know that we see at the coffee hour? To become acquainted with a stranger? When hospitality seeks to be generous, we are enacting Jesus’ teaching “do unto others as you would have others do to you”. If you had to join a new church, would you want people to speak with you, and make a place for you, and open up their circle of friendship to you?

Hospitality is also about **risk-taking**. The people who showed up at the tent were strangers. Unknown. Who are they? Are they dangerous? What might they do? Despite these kinds of uncertainties the elderly couple who were Sarah and Abraham invited them in. Little did they know their guests were spiritual beings, and that the encounter would be life-changing. One guest, after the feast, predicted that the very old Sarah would have a son. That son would be Isaac, who would continue their family line in fulfilment of God’s promise that Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation – the Jewish people. In their wildest dreams, Sarah and Abraham would never have imagined this outcome from these strangers. The stranger will always be a stranger until you take the risk of making a place for them. And, as this story tells us, you maybe surprised who that person would be.

Many years ago I experienced the finest example of hospitality imaginable during a four day canoe trip on the Madawaska River near Algonquin Park in Ontario. The trip late in October.... and it snowed every day! It was white-water canoeing, which meant you spent your time wet. As we approached the village that was the endpoint of our journey, an elderly lady came out of her riverside home and started waving at us. Not knowing what she wanted, we paddled over. She said, “You boys must be just freezing out there. Come in for a cup of tea”. Well, we were freezing, so we did. She placed newspapers on her kitchen chairs for us to sit on, newspapers under our feet, and she pulled out her home-baking. She *noticed* us and saw our need. She *invited* us to join her. She was *generous* with food. And this elderly lady took the *risk* of inviting four rough-looking young men into her home. We were strangers.... and she gave us an incredible gift – the warmth of her hearth and home. Hospitality. Perhaps you have a similar story of some kind? Hospitality, I think, is best understood in the experiencing of it.

The Letter to the Hebrews says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2). That verse reminds the reader of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, but also reminds us in the here-and-now that you never know who the stranger might become. One day, years ago, a young woman walked into our church mid-week, middle of the day. She said to me, “I don’t know why I am here. I just have a sense that I am supposed to be here.” We talked. She knew very little of Christianity, but she had a spiritual yearning. She attended our Alpha program, later joined a Bible study group. Some people opened their circles of friendship to include here. She got involved. About six years later she was an elder. As Will Rogers put it, “a stranger is a friend you haven’t met yet.”

When we think about our future it appears that VAPC wants to build on its strength for welcoming, of hospitality and inclusiveness. That is a noble and worthy pursuit. On the day of Pentecost the church was born and these values helped its growth. But not the values alone. At the Last Supper Jesus promised them “I will ask the Father to send you a helper...a comforter”—that is, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is an enabler. The Spirit helps us know who we are to be and enables our capacity to be who we are to be. Pentecost is the day we celebrate the fact that we are not alone in pursuing God’s pursuits for the world. So if we think being hospitable to the degree seen in Sarah and Abraham is too risky, today we have a great reminder. We have help.