

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Matthew 25: Feed the Hungry
The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte
July 28, 2019

Genesis 18:1-16; Matthew 25:35-40

Biblical interpretation is a serious matter. Differing methods have caused churches to fracture. Learning the various methods is a first year requirement in seminary. It's the first step your pastors take each week on the journey towards a sermon.

One of the methods I find particularly helpful is to look at what actions God cherishes and what actions God despises. I figure if I can live my life in a way that leans towards the cherished actions, I'm doing pretty good. Matthew 25 is a treasure chest of cherished behaviors. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner. All these actions are so cherished by God that God says Thank you to the people who have done these things. The people are confused because they don't remember doing these things for God but God tells them if you did them for ANYBODY you did them for me. It's a big deal God saying thank you.

This week we are looking at welcoming the stranger. Before we get to the old testament text I want to visit a town with you. This town had it all, safety, plenty of food and water, plenty of space. It was a great place to live. One day a few friends show up in town wanting to see the greatness for themselves. They are strangers but one man welcomes them into his home. Soon the welcoming man's neighbors hear about the strangers. They become fearful. They worry there is not enough room in the town for the strangers, They fear there is not enough food, or jobs, that the strangers may be dangerous. They worry the strangers will bring more people to their town, more strangers. Their fear grows and grows until the whole town is convinced the only solution is to rape and kill the strangers. That will send a clear message to anyone else wanting to join their community that they are not welcome. The town marches to the welcoming man's door and demand he send the strangers out.

The man who welcomed the strangers refuses but the town insists. As their violent intent grows they miss the clouds forming over head. The name of that town...Sodom. Sodom's sin was inhospitality. They had plenty. They could offer a welcome to these strangers but their fear lead them to a ruinous end. This story tells us that God despises inhospitality.

Hospitality is important to God because for most of their existence God's people have depended on the kind welcome of others. They wander in wildernesses, they leave homes, flee for their lives, follow rabbis on a whim. God's people depend on the faithfulness of God and the welcome of strangers to survive. God will always provide faithfulness but humanity does not always follow through with their welcome.

In our first lesson today we find Abraham and Sarah in the wilderness. God asked them to leave the comfortable home they cared for and cultivated for a life on the road. They have depended on the kindness of strangers to keep them alive and healthy. When Abraham sees these strangers outside his tent he is elated. Finally he is in a position to offer welcome to strangers. To give back to others what he has received. He has some extra food and water, he has room for them to rest. He doesn't take a single moment to question the action he jumps at the opportunity to offer a stranger his welcome.

Abraham does not know who these men are. We know because scripture gives us a spoiler that the Lord was near and these are probably angels. Abraham does not know that. But not knowing everything about these men does not cause him to spiral into fear and worry. He does not worry about who they are, he does not worry if they have weapons, or if they are high or drunk. He does not question if they are legally or if there are 100 others on the other side of the mountain who will also want food and water, Or if they will take advantage of his

welcome and use the resources offered appropriately. All Abraham knows is that he has enough and can be a blessing to these strangers.

Well Abraham does know one other thing: he knows God has asked him to be a blessing to others. So when he sees people and he sees his full packs he does not hesitate to offer the welcome he knows God cherishes. He does not let the fear that Sodom had take hold in his heart. That does not mean he was completely unafraid but his faith in God gave him the strength to choose courageous hospitality over fear.

And the most amazing thing happens. The prayer that Sarah and Abraham have been praying for years, their cries to God to send a child are finally answered. These strangers say to them you will have a child. Now Sarah laughs at this because she can see how outrageous their claim is. She has been praying for a child for decades. She has offered every offering imaginable, put together every pattern of words in her pleas to God. She has tried trust, she has tried schemes, she has tried everything to get a child, but no child has been granted. And now she gives one cup of tea to these strangers from who knows where and that is going to tip the scales. Yeah Right! Well it is. This moment of welcome is the moment God chooses to announce she will be blessed with a baby. God cherishes welcoming strangers. This story reminds us that welcoming the stranger means something to God, it get's God's attention and warms God's heart. Welcoming the stranger is worth choosing courage over fear.

A common ice breaker, which you may have been asked at some point, is "if your house was on fire what one thing would you rescue." This question is designed to get at the core of our values, do we get the iphone or Grandma's quilted blanket. Unfortunately for many in Paradise California they did not even have the luxury of grabbing one item. You may remember last year the wild fires spread so quickly, thousands were evacuated within minutes of their houses being consumed. The nearby town of Chico was spared. And in their relief and broken hearts for their neighbors Chico welcomed in nearly 20,000 people. They offered lower prices for houses, apartments, hotel rooms. They gave free food to people with Paradise addresses on their license. The town rallied around the displaced strangers with an overwhelming welcome.

One year later, fear is taking hold of the original residents and burning away their welcome. Each time their favorite restaurant is full and they can't get a table, the fire of fear burns away a little more of their welcome. As housing prices rise, the fear takes another acre of their hospitality. Do the police and fire departments seem to be responding slower? The fire spreads farther. Have you seen how many of THEM are sleeping in the park? The fire rages on. Inch by inch their welcome is burned away by fear. Even though their officials and city planners say the town is great! The economy is up, infrastructure is being funded, housing has been approved, crime is down. Every measurable point says Chico is thriving, but the fire of fear is hard to put out. Sodom knows that very well.

Chico could be anywhere. I feel annoyed handing out yet another blessing bag on the same corner every week. The church gets calls from people in need constantly and having to pick and choose who the church can help quickly extinguishes even the most giving of spirits. I fear what will really happen to the money I give out. It is hard to choose courageous welcome in the face of these fears. And yet....it is what God cherishes.

To help us find a channel for our desire to welcome the stranger I invited Ben Ogden to join us today. Ben is the director of the Welcome Inn and has on the ground experience in welcoming strangers. What does the program do? Why is it needed and who does it serve?) How has it helped (a success or feel good story)? How can our people help?