



## Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

June 30, 2002

Jer. 20:5-9

Psalm 89:15-18

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:41-42

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves."

As the story continues, we hear that the three strangers are in fact messengers of God who have come to proclaim that which was promised to Abraham and Sarah – the birth of a son. This story has been classically interpreted in the Jewish tradition as illustrating the *Mitzvah*, the commanded deed, of hospitality.

From the Midrash, the commentary on the Hebrew Bible, we hear the question, "Why was Abraham outside the door of his tent in the heat of the day rather than inside where it was cool?" And the answer that highlights the duty of hospitality is that Abraham was sitting outside, "to watch for passing strangers whom he might invite into his abode."

The Talmud is the collection of ancient rabbinic writings based on the Torah, the first five books of Hebrew Scripture. The rabbis ask why Abraham addresses the three strangers as, "My Lord." They suggest that Abraham was addressing God but that, when he saw the three men approaching, he excused himself from his prayers in order to show hospitality to the strangers. And so the Talmudic saying: "Greater than the reception of God is the practice of hospitality."

Once, however, Abraham's hospitality clashed with his zeal for the Lord. The story goes that Abraham invited a stranger into his home, but finding him praying to an idol, chased him away. God reprimanded Abraham severely: "I have put up with this man these many years, although he rebelled against me, and you cannot put up with him even for one night?" Abraham realized his sin and did not rest until he had scoured the land and brought the stranger back.

The story of Abraham that sets forth the core value of showing welcome and hospitality to the stranger is followed by another story that tells what happens to those who treat the stranger badly. There was once a city, according to Genesis, that was well-watered and like the garden of the Lord. According to Midrash, this city possessed all the luxuries of the world, and the streets were paved with gold — but its inhabitants were unwilling to share their privilege with others. Moreover, the inhabitants of this city flooded the approaches to their town so that strangers would be kept away and immigration made impossible. The people punished anyone who offered food to a stranger; they even polled their fig trees lest birds would eat of them. Rabbi Hiya said: The inhabitants of this city "deserved punishment . . . for their uncharitableness. For whoever grudges assistance to the poor does not deserve to exist in this world, and also forfeits the life of the world-to-

come. Contrariwise, whoever is generous towards the poor deserves to exist in the world, and it is for this one's sake that the world exists, and the fullness of life is reserved for this one in the world-to-come."

And so God destroyed this particular city because it would not offer hospitality to strangers, but abused those who came seeking shelter. The name of the town? Sodom. And its sin was not sexual. As the prophet Ezekiel observes, the sin of Sodom was "pride, and fullness of bread; and careless ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy. And they were haughty."

To the ancients, hospitality included vastly more than good manners; it meant gracious treatment and acceptance of strangers, and it was first among religious values.

And so Jesus in this morning's reading from St. Matthew re-articulates the command, the mitzvah, of hospitality and says that "whosoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little one – truly I tell you none of these will lose their reward." And in the letter to the Hebrews we hear the apostle say, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Even to this day, monasteries and other religious communities live with the rule that they are to welcome strangers as they would welcome Christ himself.

And so too in this community of St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles – the outsiders. As one of our departed saints, Blessed Waldo Smith, said to a young couple one Sunday, "Welcome. We take everybody here." Pointing to the young man he said, "If you like boys," and pointing to the young woman, "if you like girls, or if you like each other. Everybody's welcome here!"

Indeed, in the name of Christ and by his command, all are welcome here – single, twice-divorced, under 30, gay, filthy rich, black and proud, poor as dirt, can't sing, *no habla ingles* married with pets, older than God, married with rambunctious kids, crazier than a loon, workaholic, unemployed and lazy, more conservative than the rocks, bad speller, screaming babies, malcontent and cranky, three-times divorced, passive-aggressive, obsessive-compulsive, tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts . . . everybody's welcome.

And all this because Jesus Christ Himself first welcomed into his company, by name, and with a cup of cold water some deeply flawed and terribly peculiar characters: you and me.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN