

Friendliness Beyond Our Friends  
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May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Genesis 18:1-8

*The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*

Today is Pentecost the day when we as the church celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit that came upon the early church. The holiday of Pentecost is symbolized and represented by a variety of things; by flames, by wind, by doves, by the color red! Not only do we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the early church, but today we also celebrate the gift of God's spirit that is given to each and every one of us each and every day. And as we celebrate this morning I want us to spend some time wrestling with a very important question – what are we doing with the gift? We've been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, of God's unconditional love – what difference does it make to the world around us that we were given that gift?

I am a gum chewer. After meals, after snacks, in the middle of the afternoon, I enjoy chewing a piece of gum. I have just never been much of a mint person; I prefer chewing gum. Recently though I have discovered a new mint that I'm really excited about! They are mints that I had probably seen before, but really never taken any notice of until a friend offered me one the other night. I found some of the mints for myself this

week and the more I have thought about and eaten these mints over the last several days, the more I found myself thinking about Pentecost.

The mints have a pretty intense cinnamon flavor and as I experience the heat in my mouth I am reminded of the symbolism of flames as we celebrate Pentecost. The mints and the packaging are also red which trigger for me thoughts of our celebration today. And finally, even though the mints are hot, they do bring a cool refreshing sensation to my mouth and remind me of the ability of the Holy Spirit to refresh.

I think what first really got me about these mints though, and what continues to intrigue me, is the way they are packaged. The small plastic container has two openings, each with a little plastic tab to help open the container – one is marked “to share” and the other “not to share.” The “not to share” side of the container opens up a small little opening through which you can barely fit a mint at a time. The “to share” side of the container opens the container up all the way in half revealing what’s inside and allowing easy access to the refreshing treat that is inside.

How much are we like these little plastic containers? We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, filled with God’s presence and God’s love and then we’re faced with two options – “to share” or “not to share.” The way in which we impact the world and make a difference in the lives of others, the extent to which we are able to connect others with God’s love, depends on which of those two options we’re going to chose.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all called Abrahamic faith traditions because they trace their roots back to the Patriarch Abraham. Abraham is a hero of the faith for a variety of reasons, his risk taking, his obedience to God, and his trust to name just a few. However, Abraham is also a hero for another reason that often gets too little credit – for

his gift of hospitality. One of the best known illustrations of Abraham's hospitality comes in a story found in Genesis 18.

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As a wealthy man Abraham could have ignored these travelers, he could have waited until they approached him, but he didn't. As soon as he saw travelers coming toward him he ran out to greet them, offered them food and drink and provided them with a comfortable place to sit and rest. Abraham offers the gift of hospitality to strangers.

This story is a significant metaphor for the calling we have on our lives as people of faith to extend hospitality, yes, even to strangers. The story of Abraham illustrates this for us because we later learn that these strangers passing by Abraham's way were actually angels who had come to deliver the message that even in her old age, Abraham's wife Sarah would have a child. The metaphor is powerful; we are called to extend hospitality to strangers because, as the author of Hebrews in the Christian Scriptures points out, by doing so we might have the opportunity to entertain angels.

Now as I talk about hospitality I want to make it clear that I'm not overly concerned with the Martha Stewart Good Housekeeping methods for hospitality. Fancy napkins, foofy table arrangements and those kinds of things don't do much for me and honestly they don't do much to truly meet the needs of people. However, as we

acknowledge our calling to be hospitable this morning I want to talk specifically about some of the simple ways in which we have the opportunity to do this both as individuals and as a community of faith.

On the individual or family level we have the opportunity to be hospitable whenever people come through our doors. Sometimes we have the opportunity to offer hospitality to service persons who come to work on cable, plumbing, flooring, etc. In these situations we have the opportunity to extend simple hospitality by offering a glass of water, something to snack on, or a soda. Even opening up our bathrooms to these guests can be a meaningful gesture of hospitality. Admittedly though, in these situations things don't usually go much further than this – they're in our homes with a certain task to accomplish and we're usually either headed out the door or frantically running around trying to take care of our to-do list for the day. Nonetheless we have the opportunity to be hospitable in even small ways.

On a level deeper than these simple encounters then we have the opportunity to be hospitable when we intentionally invite persons into our homes for a visit or for a meal. Think about the ways in which we greet our friends, family, and neighbors when we have invited them to come over for an evening. We meet them at the door, often opening it for them, we take their coats, point them to a place where they could sit to rest and be comfortable, and we offer to get them something to drink and/or to eat as they visit. These kinds of things are second nature for many of us. We love having people over, we love visiting with them, and we treat them well because we simply feel like it's what you're supposed to do.

As I said a minute ago we as a community of faith are also given opportunities to be hospitable, but I fear that all too often we don't take those opportunities. When guests join us for worship or activities here at the church we have the tendency to get no further than treating them as if they are a service person in our homes – we might quickly point them towards the coffee pot or the bathroom, but often we don't take time to truly make them feel welcome and to engage them. We are often too rushed trying to get kids to Sunday school, trying to catch up with a friend, trying to make plans for bridge or golf or a meal in the coming week. Part of being hospitable means slowing down so that we can welcome and engage our guests.

I have heard it said over and over again that this is a very friendly church and it is. However, sometimes our warmth and our friendliness stops within our circle of friends. If we don't know someone we'll be hesitant to approach them. We don't want to look silly if they are a member who usually attends another service, we don't want to look silly if we feel like we should know who they are, but can't remember their name. And so we drift back towards the people we know, toward our friends, toward people with whom we are comfortable. Friends, when we do this – we are choosing to open ourselves up with the “not to share” tab. The friends that we know the best will receive the gifts of our friendship and the Holy Spirit working through us, but we don't provide much for people we don't know well, for guests that might be with us, and for the world around us as a whole. As followers of Christ in the world we are called to use the “to share” tab on our lives and to open ourselves up fully to all who we encounter.

I understand that doing these things can be scary; sharing ourselves, opening ourselves up to others, stepping outside of our comfort zone all make us vulnerable. But,

our calling as people seeking to live in relationship with God is to be hospitable – to all people – for in doing so some have even entertained angels.

May 15-17 the Ridge Church staff went away on our annual planning retreat and had a great time laughing together and dreaming big about the future of Ridge Church. We got a lot of great work accomplished and are really excited about a lot that is coming up and we want all of you as the congregation to be on board with these great things too. Much of what we do as a congregation is geared towards reaching out to the community that surrounds us and you as members and regular attendees, or even people who are visiting for the first time today, can be our greatest ambassadors in the community. As we reach out to invite people to join us and then seek to be hospitable by sharing God's love when people come through our doors.

Over the next year we will be continuing to do many of the things that we have been doing over the last year. We will be continuing to encourage people who can to park at Wilbur Wright Middle School to provide enough space in our lot for people who need to park close to the building. We will continue to be encouraging all members and regular attendees to wear nametags as we continue to get to know one another better as a congregation. We will continue to have greeters opening the doors and welcoming people to the building before worship services and other activities. We will continue to have food and coffee out darn near all of the time. And we will continue to be connecting with first time visitors by sending out letters and information about Ridge Church.

We are also working right now to develop a business card that all members and friends of Ridge Church can carry. On the front will be our worship schedule, as well as

contact information for the church. On the back will be directions to the church and a map. We hope that each of you will begin carrying a few in your wallet or in your purse or in your car so that you can distribute them to people you meet that might enjoy connecting with the things going on at Ridge Church. We'll let you know when these are available in the next month or so.

We're going to be doing some fun and exciting new things in the coming school year too though and we want you all to begin getting excited about them now. August 26<sup>th</sup> we're going to kick off our fall programming with Ridge Fest '07. In worship that morning Steve will be kicking off a Sermon Series called "Being a Good Neighbor" and that afternoon and evening we're going to have a big festival at the church with a pie baking contest, a BBQ cook off, water games and dry games, ice cream, live music and more – maybe even Pastor Steve and I in a dunk tank, we'll just have to see.

On Wednesday evenings then through the school year we're going to have a new program called WWE @ Ridge – Wonderful Wednesday Evenings. Middle School open gym will still be held from 2:40 – 5:00 each Wednesday. The education area will be offering a children's program on Wednesday evenings, Heather will be incorporating Children's music into that program, there will be educational opportunities for middle school and senior high youth, there will be adult education opportunities offered by Steve, Kathy, myself and others, there will be a meal each week, and there will be child care provided. It is our hope that families will make Wednesday evening their night at the church and will take advantage of all of these opportunities for people of all ages. It is also our hope that you will get excited about this, plug in to help in different ways, and invite your friends and neighbors to check it out too.

I'm also working to put together a team of people help take all of our welcoming and hospitality ministries to the next level. If you're interested in being a part of this team and working on all of these exciting things that are going on mark your Calendars for Monday June 8<sup>th</sup> at 3:00pm or let me know what you're interested in learning more.

God has given us so many gifts and we are so lucky to be a part of a community of faith that continues to explore and seeks to live out those gifts and the blessings that they are for ourselves and for others. Today on Pentecost we remember the gift of God's love that has been given to us freely and we are again faced with a question – what are we going to do with it. We each have a choice. We can live our lives using only the “not to share” tab and keeping God's blessing to ourselves or we can open up the “to share” tab and pass on God's blessings to all who we meet.