

2nd Sunday after Pentecost, yr. a, 6/14/2020

Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:14

What Shall I Return to the Lord? – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

What does God value most in relationship with us human beings? I am often struck as I read the Bible and in my prayer life how God interacts with us from a place of intimacy and familiarity that surprises; relates in a way that goes against much of what we have been taught about God and of what God expects of us – or what we have come to expect from God. I don't know how it was with many of you, but I do remember as a child hearing Bible stories that quite honestly made God seem scary, kind of like someone you'd want to stay on the good side of, or else God would "get you for that." The words of the "Prayer of Confession" I remember saying every Sunday from the "old" Episcopal Book of Common Prayer always put it quite succinctly: "Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all things, judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us."

And if God wasn't scary like that, God was sort of like parents (which made some sense to me as a child since God was often called "Father") who were the Givers of blessings and all good things ... but there could be a catch to it all when those occasions arose when love and blessing seemed kind of conditional; like "No dessert until you eat all your lima beans."

That combination of fierceness and conditional blessing could make it hard to recognize and experience God's steadfast love and mercy and compassion. Now I grant you that at certain stages and times in our lives, particularly when we are very young and not yet able to care for ourselves, we may need that "lima bean condition", and in moments of great danger or temptation, we may need the "fear of God" instilled in us. We need to learn and experience what is harmful to ourselves and others and how we can do harm. We need to learn some limits. (Although I really don't understand about the necessity of eating lima beans.) ... But we also need to learn and experience love, and mercy, and trustworthiness and how to be trustworthy, and "walk in love as Christ loved us, and gave himself for us ..." (Eph. 5)

God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near by. When he saw them, he invited them to come, sit under the shade of the tree and he and Sarah fed them – lavishly, unstintingly. And as they were eating and Abraham was tending to their needs, they asked after Sarah, and one of them said that when he returned next year Sarah would have had a son. Well, Sarah, listening at the entrance of the tent, laughs and says to herself, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" And God says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?' At the set time I shall return, and Sarah shall have a son." Sarah, getting nervous says, "I did not laugh." But God says, "Yes, you did

laugh.” Nine months later Sarah and Abraham have a son, and they call him Isaac which means “laughter”.

This story from Genesis about Abraham and Sarah could be a story recounting any family history, family memory, told over and over again at the supper table. The stories of shared family intimacies, trust, and love around a meal, like what happened when certain guests came to dinner one night, and then the laughter at ourselves, our foibles and misunderstandings and the wonder of what happened next, and the blessings that we’ve experienced. The stories of how God is in the midst of it all, sharing, laughing, rejoicing along with us. ... And best of all, God accommodates God’s self to our needs and foibles, understands our deepest desires and eases our darkest fears. God is in the midst of everything that our family, our household, our community cherishes about life lived in relationship together.

In this account of God coming to Abraham and Sarah and their household sharing their hospitality, we have this gentle, understanding, accommodating gesture from God that is easy for us to miss. It’s a moment both familiar to our human behavior yet surprising when we think of it as coming from God. As the Talmud, the tradition of the rabbis, tells it handed down over many centuries of telling, hearing and interpreting this “family” story: After God reveals that Sarah is to bear a son by Abraham, both being so old, Sarah laughs skeptically and says to herself, “Am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old?” But then

God, when repeating this to Abraham, reports her words with a slight – and vital – modification, saying that Sarah said, “Shall I bear a son, old as I am?”

According to the rabbis, God understands how hurt Abraham would be if he heard Sarah laugh because of how old he is. So God slightly changes what Sarah said to safeguard Abraham’s feelings “for the sake of peace”.

God shaded the truth! Shaded the truth to preserve the feelings and the domestic peace of Abraham and Sarah. Through this story of Abraham’s hospitality to God under the oak trees at Mamre in the heat of the day, was born the Jewish wisdom tradition of modifying our statements of truth “for the sake of peace.” As one rabbi put it in a Torah commentary; “Honesty is of value only insofar as it helps human beings live together in peace. If serving the Lord does not lead to caring for the dignity of other human beings, does not lead to a willingness to protect another’s feelings, even at the cost of being “honest”, then there’s something lacking in our notion of what God wants. “

According to the Torah (the Law of Moses – the first 5 books of the Bible) God most values human caring. Honesty in the service of compassion and growth is a mitzvah, (a duty, obligation or act of kindness in keeping with God’s commandments) even if the truth is painful. Honesty simply to air one’s own viewpoint at the expense of another human being’s feelings is a betrayal of God.” (Artson, *The Bedside Torah*, p. 24)

Then Jesus went about all the towns and villages, teaching in their meeting places, proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom, healing their diseases, healing their bruised and hurt lives. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them; his heart broke, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Pray to God to send out workers into God's harvest." Jesus then called 12 of his followers and sent them out. He gave them the power to cast out evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives ... And he gave them instructions: not to go to far off places at first, but go to the lost right here in the neighborhood ... telling people that the kingdom is here, and bringing health to the sick. He also said, "You have received generously – without payment – give generously, without payment. Take nothing, keep nothing for "just in case", but live hospitably depending on the generosity of others.

It would seem that what God values most in God's relationship with us, what God calls us to do, asks of us, is to engage in extravagant, and even costly hospitality – to go forth and share generously, with no strings, no expectations other than the joy of sharing in the compassion of God. If in doing so we run into hostility or rejection or hard times, shake it off. The judging is up to God not us. Our obligation (our mitzvah as it were) is to welcome and provide for others. Its what we're called to do, invited to do, as Christians, as Christ's church. And do it in a very real sense for free.

Lately I've begun to imagine what my ministry would be like if I did not get paid to do it. In so many ways we have delegated and abrogated our hospitality to institutions and people we pay to care for others – care even for our loved ones. We pay and expect our schools and teachers to instill in our children values and responsibilities and teach them to think for themselves and make good choices, we pay and expect our pastors and churches to provide all kinds of services for us, we shell out big bucks to provide health care and expect healthcare professionals to deliver. And all of this is necessary and good for the well-being of people and the common good. It is the way that we try to insure justice and that all are cared for in this world.

However ... sometimes it feels as if we've lost something, that we've made God's love and justice a matter of allocating scarcity that erodes and often destroys. We forget that in the overflowing abundance of God's love and mercy we are invited to share God's own hospitality in community. The community and communion of relationship that allows for knowing that, when life-threatening illness comes upon those whom we love or ourselves, or upon the world in this pandemic; when there is pain and hurt that goes so deep we hardly know the bottom of it, there are others that know it and can share it and walk with us through it.

We need to continue to find or recover the practice of a hospitality that, along with Abraham and Sarah, will drop everything and do anything to welcome

strangers .. to welcome God into our lives. ... The kind of hospitality that makes room for compassion and speaking trustworthy words that after all, really recognize and take into account that you hate lima beans. My hunch is that we find this hospitality in ways similar to Abraham and Sarah our ancestors in faith, find it in our living and freely sharing with one another rather than finding or worrying too much about how to pay for it.

When Jesus sends us out to heal and teach and share the news of God's love and mercy, to share God's desire to be in relationship with all whom God has made, he tells us to take nothing behind which we can hide or protect ourselves, or keep back for a rainy day. But rather to go out and practice hospitality – giving and receiving – in an open-hearted, grateful way. Always asking, in the words of our psalm; “what shall I return to the Lord for all God's bounty to me?” For nothing is too wonderful or too hard for God. Amen.

Source Cited:

Artson, Bradley Shavit, *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Visions, Dreams*. (2001).

