

Near Enough to Hear the Laughter  
June 15, 2008  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
The First Presbyterian Church  
Genesis 18:1-15  
Matthew 9:35-10:7

June is a month filled with anticipation and transition. It is the month when summer really comes upon us; summer's stifling heat and humidity in our urban landscape is tempered by quiet promises of rest. It is a month of high school graduations, a rite of passage unique in its desire by parents and teenagers alike to hold onto what has been, with both parties knowing all the while that things will never quite be the same. Despite tearful promises of friendships never changing, the inevitable will happen as lives take different turns and new bonds are built around shared experiences of post-high school life.

I just returned this past week from western Pennsylvania where I watched my niece graduate from the same high school whose halls I haunted and then left some years ago with that unique mix of fear and anticipation. It was a steaming day in the non-air conditioned "gymnasium," a chorus of babies and toddlers from her family disrupted her valedictory address with a sudden eruption of chatter as soon as they heard her voice. As she quoted "Wicked" and playwright Suzan Lori-Parks, my niece put words to the transition toward the future that the pomp and circumstance of the day only alluded to.

The quote she cited from Suzan Lori Parks was as follows: "Relish the fact that the road of your life will probably be a windy one. Something like the yellow brick road in the 'Wizard of Oz.' You see the glory of Oz up ahead, but there are lots of twists and turns along the way-lots of tin men, lots of green women."<sup>1</sup> June is the kind of month when the twists and turns of the road seem more apparent to us. It is as if we have come to crest of a hill, and as we stop and turn to look in all directions, we suddenly have an unprecedented view of what lies ahead and where we have been. There are twists behind us we do not even remember, and turns ahead that are much sharper than they appear.

The idea of our faith being a journey on a rather twisting road has become so common it is almost cliché. However the scripture readings for this Sunday in June bring us face to face with a particular aspect of journeying. Both the passage from Genesis that Mike read and the passage from Matthew's Gospel that Sarah read invite us to consider not just the twists and turns of the journey but the hospitality that is encountered along that winding road. We all know the importance of hospitality as we travel; we recognize and cherish those places where we know the door is always open, the bedcover always turned down. These scripture passages highlight the deeper layers of hospitality.

The passage from Matthew begins with a description of Jesus' ministry of hospitality. He goes among the villages, teaching and healing. He shows compassion to the crowds, and it is that compassion that motivates him to send out the disciples to help in this work. The disciples work is about nearness. They are to tell people that the kingdom of heaven is close enough to bump into; literally they are to say "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Yet the disciples are also given specific instructions about who they should go to and who they should not go to, and, just after the passage we heard this morning, they are given detailed responses about what they should do if they are not welcomed. But it is that proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom in relation to hospitality that gives us pause today. Why is it included? What does the kingdom's

nearness offer to the hospitality the disciples are offering and receiving? The two concepts are much more intertwined than it first appears.

As Jesus is traveling throughout the region, to cities and villages, teaching about the kingdom, curing people, he realizes that the need is even greater than what he can provide. He identifies the problem as the people being “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” His compassion is the motivating factor around him deciding to share this responsibility of teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness. He states the problem he sees as a metaphor about the harvest: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” We are so used to this idea of discipleship that we often miss the radical nature of what Jesus was doing. If you have ever had a fleeting thought that Jesus was just some charismatic religious leader, promoting his own cause, this sharing of authority is one of the key elements that disrupts that notion. In fact, training his followers to recognize and point out the kingdom is actually one of the main aspects of all the gospels, even though like us, the disciples are often slow to catch on to the teaching and hesitant to implement the plan.

Sharing the hospitality of the kingdom is prioritized as this passage unfolds. Empowering the disciples to go out into the world seems at first to be focused on healing. The only tools they are given are the “authority” over unclean spirits, and the ability to cure every disease and sickness. I can understand the disciples needing this boost in their skills, casting out demons and curing the sick seem as though they would be the most pressurized parts of shepherding this flock. But when Jesus gives them instructions of what to do and say among the people, the very first thing the disciples do is *not* to cure the sick, or raise the dead, cleanse the lepers or cast out demons. The very first thing they are to do is proclaim the good news in the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

If I were a disciple back then, I would have been tempted to raise my hand, or pull Jesus’ aside and ask, what’s this nearness of the kingdom of heaven supposed to mean? I suppose nine chapters of living together might have given the disciples some clue, but this passage clearly makes a connection between the nearness of the kingdom of heaven and the other acts of hospitality ministry. The connection means that a major element of extending hospitality is the belief in the nearness of the kingdom of heaven.

Receiving hospitality is also connected to the knowledge of the nearness of the kingdom. In Genesis 18, Abraham, who had been quietly sitting in the entrance of his tent, bursts into action at the sight of the three strangers before him. He runs to meet them; he offers them water; he offers to wash their feet; he let’s them rest; he offers them bread. He hastens, he runs, he brings them not just “curds and milk” but a freshly prepared calf for these complete strangers to enjoy. His flurry of activity is expected in the covenant of hospitality in Old Testament times. Hospitality is a reciprocal relationship, food and rest are offered and in return travelers share news from their journeys, and in this case of the visitors being divine travelers, they share the blessing of a promised child to a couple for whom nothing could be more unexpected.

Sarah’s character plays an interesting role in the hospitality of this passage. She is behind the scenes, bustling like Abraham, making bread, preparing food for her guests to feel welcome. A woman in a man’s world, she does not join the conversation even when the divine travelers inquire as to her whereabouts, but they seem to know she is near enough to hear their good news that she and Abraham will have a son. The narrator makes sure we as readers know why this good news is not just unexpected but unprecedented, for we are told: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” It’s hard

to imagine a more convoluted way of saying she was past childbearing years, but this fact, however it is said, elevates the good news beyond a traveler's tale to the heights of a miraculous act of the Lord.

If we expect cheering or a tear-filled hug between Abraham and Sarah, if we expect the passionate kiss of hope born in a long overdue desire, we are surprised. Memorably, Sarah laughs within herself and so doing seems to challenge the messengers perhaps slightly more than she intended. Abraham is famously silent, which is largely ignored in conversations about this text. In terms of the contract of hospitality, neither Abraham nor Sarah receive this news with quite the excitement that was messengers expected.

Sarah's response garners the attention of the text, so let's examine it a little further; we'll leave Abraham for another time. In the context of giving and receiving hospitality, the question lingers around this text: is Sarah's response inhospitable? The reaction of the Lord (who suddenly appears, confusing the situation with another question as to whether this group of travelers includes the Lord) is full of sting at being questioned: "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything so wonderful for the Lord?" Sarah then denies her laughter, satisfying some commentators that she has now repaired any breach in the hospitality code.<sup>ii</sup> However, what Sarah appears to grasp in this interchange is the nearness of the kingdom. At first, she does not recognize the divinity of the travelers until she realizes that they were near enough to hear her laughter. That is significant when we go back and read again that she laughed *within* herself. No one but the Lord could be near enough to hear that laughter. She does not realize she is the presence of the Eternal One until her doubt has already been revealed.

As with the disciples, the nearness of the kingdom or the closeness of the presence of God is the most important aspect of hospitality. However, that nearness is often the most difficult aspect of hospitality to understand. I don't know about you, but I can think of countless opportunities to act with hospitality and hopefulness that instead illicit a response in me similar to Sarah's internal laughter. Many of us are not filled with as much hope as we would like to be, I know I am not. I believe that nothing is too wonderful for God, but I do doubt sometimes that God is close enough to hear my laughter. I feel hopeless and unsure how to offer hospitality when I see the flooding the Midwest part of our country or watch as another town torn apart by a tornado. I feel hopeless and unsure how to offer hospitality when I think about how many places in the world are in need of peaceful solutions to violent conflict. I feel hopeless and unsure how to offer hospitality to point of tears when ten percent of my niece's high school class is likely headed to war, enlisted in the military. I feel hopeless and unsure how to offer hospitality when I hear the ways racism and religious intolerance tear at fabric of our national identity. I laugh within myself far too much, unaware that it is overheard by a wayfaring God who is constantly at my door.

The nearness of the kingdom is more than a state of mind. It is recognizing that hospitality is not just about me and you, or about welcoming the wayfaring stranger, whoever they may be. Hospitality is about hope and believing that nothing is too wonderful for God. Hospitality always includes a third party, the nearness of the presence of God. Modern hospitality has different protocols than it did in the Old or New Testaments, but hospitality is still something we strive to give and try to be open to receive. Churches are places where conversations about hospitality are constant. We want to be more welcoming, we want to provide rest for the weary, we want the authority to touch all who are ill and make them well. And like

Sarah, we find ourselves not unconcerned but unaware. We limit the conversation; we forget the nearness of the kingdom and the one who is close enough to hear our laughter.

Hospitality's key element is the knowledge of the presence of the God. It is this knowledge that fills us with hope; it is this knowledge that keeps us refreshed despite the twists and turns of the road on which we journey. The promise of hospitality is an embrace through our transitions. The promise of hospitality is to be a companion in our anticipation, no matter how windy the road. The presence of God being a partner with us in hospitality is not meant to squash our laughter or disregard our doubts about how to bring change in the world. On the contrary, Sarah needs to feel the laughter within to be reminded that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. So it is with us, do not train yourself to not to laugh at the impossible. Train yourself to laugh out loud at what seems impossible, for the noise might just remind you that God is near enough to hear your laughter.

Stop in that moment and rest for a while, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

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<sup>i</sup> Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Commencement Speech to the Mount Holyoke College Class of 2001*. May 27, 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Otto, David. "Hospitality: Loving the Stranger, part 1" [www.thethoughtfulchristian.com](http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com), 2007.