

GENESIS 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19

ROMANS 5:1-8

MATTHEW 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

Third Sunday after Pentecost; Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 18, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Tent Meeting!

It was just another ordinary, uneventful, day in the life of a nomadic herder, though this time it just happened to be the future father of the faithful, that would be Abraham, along with his lovely wife Sarah. The two of them were now living their golden years, but continuing the life that they had always known as they tenderly moved their livestock to greener pastures. Born in Ur of the Chaldeans, according to the biblical account in the book of Genesis, the couple had left the land of Haran as they traveled on this magical, mystery tour to the land God would show them, a sojourn that literally would be fraught with adventure. “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. . .’ So, Abram went, as the Lord had told him! Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.” Yes, Abraham and Sarah were headed to an undisclosed location, a place to be determined, “the land of I know not of,” as the late Baptist minister and comedian of Hee Haw fame, Grady Nutt, called it in his final sermon preached at Crescent Hill Baptist Church in November 1981. I was there! **We know this story well, their story well, because it is at Abraham and Sarah’s tent, sequestered from the heat of the day in their somewhat safe and secure quarters under the terebinths where they were encamped, an oasis called the oaks of Mamre, where the**

three divine visitors masquerading as men, or men masquerading as angels, approached the elder nomad and eventual would be statesman, for what turned out to be an amazing and most revelatory visit. Yes, welcome to an ancient version of a tent meeting! It was under these very shade trees where Abraham and Sarah were informed that they would become parents in their old age, that Sarah would be with child, another mythic, miraculous biblical birth. Of course, Sarah dismissed these wild tales, laughing off these crazy ideas, these absurd notions, probably hysterically so, more than amused at the preposterous idea of such biologically impossible notions. And that is usually where the lesson in the story begins and ends, is born and dies. Not today! For this morning, we are gifted with two quintessential hospitality texts, all eyes can now roll at once! **Two of our texts today significantly form the lynchpins on which hangs hospitality as a primary biblical and theological foundation. I have hinted about this idea in numerous sermons. Today I get to release the hounds! Hold on tight!**

As the three anonymous, unnamed, visitors, strangers who will quickly become guests, there is a significant difference in terms of extending an invitation, approach an unsuspecting but receptively waiting Abraham, this happy camper fully exposed, suddenly placed in a compromising position imposed by the arrival of a surprise trio of serendipitous travelers who could very well turn out to be enemies in disguise, marauding thieves, robbers, out to bring Abe and his family harm. Despite the potential danger, a very real threat, this patriarchal figure would run with unbridled haste, with reckless abandon, to warmly greet them, a proper customary practice in the protocols of ancient Near Eastern hospitality. Yes, it should remind us of the way the father in the parable of the prodigal excitedly runs to greet the son who was lost but is now found, yes, another hospitality text! The writer of Genesis indicates the nature of the three men of mystery and intrigue wrapped in much enigma, but keeps their mission a secret

until. . . Our story innocently begins with the writer declaring that “the Lord appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” **The Yahwist writer desires that the reader, then and now, have no doubt who this angelic trinity represents! This storyteller wants us to know for certain because these figures, one of whom will vanish as if into thin air, will play a gigantic, humongous, role not only here at the oaks but then directly involved in the fateful events at Sodom and Gomorrah, a pivotal story that follows immediately in Genesis 19.**

What we see clearly, transparently, in this encounter between Abraham and Sarah and their visitors turned guests, in a scenario that indeed serves as a prelude to the grand announcement about Sarah’s impending pregnancy, but oh so much more, is that in this text from Genesis 18 we find a scenario perfectly articulating, modeling in vivid description, a scene carefully, meticulously, portraying, giving high definition to the practices commensurate with the proper protocols of the ancient custom of hospitality, each component of this historic practice illustrated in greatest detail. Ancient Near Eastern hospitality, born among the nomads and codified in Bedouin culture, was an ancient form of détente guaranteeing the safety of both host and guest when unexpected encounters became the order of a given day. A washing of feet, a lavish first meal, and a guarantee of three days’ lodging and basic accommodation were required to fulfill this obligatory sacred custom. What we see at work in this object lesson in the unfolding drama being acted in Genesis 18 is a model for how hospitality was and is to be conducted, an event recorded by the biblical writer that becomes a theme pervading all the Bible, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures alike. We see it in the Shema Israel, in Deuteronomy 6:4, with the reminder that God is one, including the caveat that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and might, becoming a baseline leading to the admonition to love everyone, including self. We see it explicitly ordered in Leviticus 19, of all places,

with the command to love neighbor, the alien, the foreigner, the stranger in the midst, interestingly sandwiched between Leviticus 18 and 20 which contain a host of prohibitive texts describing, among other things, laws determining the parameters of human sexuality. Another story for another day! We read throughout the Bible the requirement to care for widows and orphans, this category of persons representing all those who live on the fringes, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and marginalized of society, Gentiles, the sick and infirmed, tax collectors and sinners, women, the unclean, the last and least according to Jesus. These are the persons the rabbi lovingly went out of his way to engage and embrace and to hospitably welcome and include into the realm of God on earth, best illustrated in the parable of the great banquet feast in Luke, an elaborate table of abundance where everyone is generously invited. Folks, as my friend Jill Bierwirth notes, the Bible can either be used as a weapon or an instrument of welcome. We get to choose! Folks, it don't get better, or clearer, than this!

Shifting gears on the fly here, we turn aside and read a great story from Matthew's Gospel, the sending of the twelve on what was perhaps their inaugural missionary journey. This story was written seemingly at a time when Jesus had not yet learned and thus had not yet begun to teach that his message was universal, inclusively intended for all persons and was not exclusively meant solely for the faith tradition of his birth, his spiritual family of origin. Jesus tells the disciples that without his watchful eye, no supervision, they are to go on a mission trip, their maiden voyage, yes, their first solo flight, specifically tasked with making cold calls, visiting the homes of those now described as the lost sheep of Israel. As a part of this adventure, they are to avoid all contact with Gentiles, especially those of Samaritan orientation. In retrospect, it all seems rather bizarre, so counter intuitive, so un-Jesus like! Thankfully, the day was quickly approaching, a day was rapidly coming on the rabbi's radar, when the

man from Nazareth would learn, probably through the testimony of that bold Syrophenician or Canaanite woman, take your pick based on Matthew or Mark, and would teach from that point forward that the gracious love of God, the gospel, literally translated “good news,” was meant for every human being ever created, each one crafted in the beautiful image of God. Yes, Jesus’ shift was a complete and total 180. This radical change represented the most audaciously transformative belief, returning to an ancient tradition seemingly lost, now avoided or ignored, while obliterating current discriminatory practices within the Judaism of the day.

Jesus instructs his disciples not to take any financial means with them on this journey, no backpack, or two shirts or sandals, no walking stick. Yes, in many ways this sacred task appears to be a test to the traditional Jews to whom he was directly sending his disciples. After all, these were a people who should have been well-versed in practicing the rubrics of local hospitable customs. But even Jesus had his doubts, his misgivings about what would transpire, telling his devotees that he was sending them “as sheep among wolves,” and thus they were to be “wise as snakes and innocent as doves!” Wow, what a sendoff! He had already admonished them that as they approached a home they were to declare “peace” to all who resided there. He then ominously, subtly, warns them with further instruction, “If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if the house is not worthy, take back your blessing. If anyone refuses to welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave that house or city. I assure you that it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on Judgment Day than it will be for that city!” Oh my! Jesus’ clear inference here is a reminder that Lot’s guests, those whom we first met by the oaks of Mamre in their encounter and lodging with Abraham and Sarah, were rejected by the wickedly uninviting and unwelcoming men of Sodom in a most inhospitable display, unacceptable behavior bringing about their judgment and destruction.

Sexual relationships had nothing to do with this text! Ironically, Lot himself was a resident alien in Sodom, thus knowing full well the implications, the desperate need to be protected by his hosts.

Today's texts are stark reminders that at the core of our religiosity, at the heart of our spirituality, is the command to love neighbor, and as we all know full well, neighbor means any and everybody, and loving means engaging and embracing, accepting and affirming, always and everywhere! The meat of the gospel is the admonition to embrace, to hospitably welcome and include all peoples from all walks of life. We know this stuff! This is basic! This is gospel! This affirmation needs not the deepest level of intellectual acumen. And yet, a significant part of Christendom, especially sectarian Christian America, including the scourge of white Christian nationalists, continues to explicitly, intentionally, exclude, promoting and promulgating practices that divide and conquer, rather than unite. These presumed elitists continue to render to the sidelines as second class, as inferior, a whole host of those who, rather than being emboldened and empowered in their faith formation, fueling their life's calling whatever it may be, are continually dispossessed, disenfranchised and marginalized. Repulsively, these people dismissed as the "other", of course, including migrants and immigrants seeking asylum, are regarded as fringe elements, not belonging, rather than part of the fabric woven into the mainstream of society that all persons are, the standing and status to which they are freely and unquestionably entitled. We know oppression and prejudice in all its manifestations! We know it when we see it and we see it every day.

As you are aware, the month of June has become fully associated with PRIDE, a time of celebration of the LGBTQQIA+ community, much of the nation recognizing the value and worth, the contributions, of persons of nonheterosexual orientation. In the United Church of Christ, PRIDE Sunday is next Sunday, June 25th! The colors of the

rainbow, a spectrum of beauty that transcends all human differences while affirming diversity, reminds us that we are all created *imago Dei* from a single creative source, in the image of God, that we are all loved, graciously so, that we are all included in the grand portrait of God's creation. And yet, we see on the news everyday instances where oppression reigns and attempts are being made to limit, to role back, rights and privileges that should never be up for debate. "Make America Florida!" Please! No thank you! The Trans community is in real danger! My friend Jill relayed the sign recommended by the youth group where she is pastor, a phrase that now proudly adorns Richmond Beach UCC's marquee: "They is a beautiful pronoun for God!" Sounds trinitarian to me! The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has just declared a national state of emergency for LGBTQ people! We have made so much progress and yet, despite advances—even Chic-fil-a has opened an office for diversity and the company is catching hell from the religious and political right for appropriately and soberly doing so—we continue to digress as a civilization called to human hospitality and hospitality to all creation, our shallow understanding of dominion be damned. All humanity is called to unite and to hospitably welcome and include in every way possible a spirit that is open and affirming of all the freedoms that God desires for the human being and doing.

Every day we have breath, as we have throughout our human history, we continue to learn more about the depth and breadth of humanity, including the mystery of human sexuality, everything we now know aided by science, biology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and that demands our willingness to embrace those who now represent the alien, the foreigner, the stranger, in our midst. And, of course, the Bible tells us so! By the way, sexuality is a matter of biology not theology! Our biblical forebears in the faith understood all that they were capable, all that was possible, limited in their world view as they were. Sometimes this limitation determined arcane, outdated, viewpoints, a

worldview, that we now know are just flat out wrong. We are the benefactors of their struggles along with contemporary scientific discovery fueling the wonderful evolution of our minds. Ours is no longer a pre-scientific, flat earth society, but is a radically different world and that world is a kaleidoscope of all the characteristics, the attributes, that make us human, constituting humanity in this twenty-first century, postmodern age. Whenever we read the Bible, we must stand in two worlds as we interpret it. As my friend Jill says, and I concur, the Bible can either be a weapon or a welcome and we get to choose! It must be bot/and, not either/or!

We also have recently come to understand the significance of Juneteenth, strangely, this day only recently coming on our collective radar as a nation. I would be remiss today to not mention it! Every year now, on June 19th, we honor the freedom that was two years delayed following the Emancipation Proclamation, a promise denied to those who should have been former slaves in Texas. This liberation from our version of colonialism was so way overdue, and of course, was an indenture that should never have been. Justice delayed is justice denied, every time, all the time! Over the course of the last decade, we have sadly and unfortunately seen a rise, a renewal, a revival, of racist rhetoric, white supremacists once again proudly encouraged, white “Christian” nationalists emerging from their dark shadows, feeling emboldened and empowered to come out into the light of day as they slink forth from their closets of disgust, evil, and shameless opinions, thankfully transparently revealed as they all are, the sheets mostly removed. I guess we all knew it was there, simmering beneath the surface like a toxic sludge seeking to pollute the groundwater of our best societal aspirations. Oh, how we wish it were a dream, to use an image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but oh what a nightmare it truly is as it manifests its ugly hatred among us. **Yes, we have come so far but we have so far to go! The task is never complete, the journey never finished. This is our time! It is our prerogative to be responsible for**

how we then shall live, accountable to God and to one another and yes, to ourselves.

And I would be remiss this morning if I did not name the actions of my former denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, as it expelled the last holdout, the only remaining ecclesial vestiges of a diversely bygone era, disfellowshipping churches that dared to deign to have a woman as its pastor. Frankly, most of us expatriates had no idea there was any remnant left after the demonic purging from the 1980s and 90s! So very stupid! This insidious display of theological bigotry is a painful reminder that the fight for women's equality continues to be a battle waged against the circled wagons of a multitude of insular fundamentalist, sectarian environs, these pockets of pious perversion. It is also a reminder that blissful ignorance continues to reign in the recesses of certain narrow-minded bastions of patriarchal nonsense, enclaves of exclusivity, and that the goal of and battle for ultimate social justice remains a high priority for the followers of Jesus' graciously loving way. Unfortunately, it seems as if we have only just begun the fight! The goal in all these sordid and backward thinking instances, in every situation I have described and those I have not, is to return us to whatever century kept certain individuals and groups, the list a long one, suppressed and in their presumed place.

Today's lections are reminders that even in their simplistic understandings and approaches, our biblical forebears knew in their being, yes, in their hearts, that a hospitably welcoming and inclusive spirit was the goal advocated by their God, the same God we now worship and serve. Despite their very real and understandable fears about the unknown wanderers who might come their way, they believed that they had no option but to extend a hand and to offer the best of their provisions, a basic requirement of human decency and virtue. The early Church was certainly aware of the risks of this level of hospitable vulnerability as they put these Matthean words into Jesus'

mouth and into action, with the warning to “Watch out for people— because they will hand you over to councils and they will beat you in their synagogues. They will haul you in front of governors and even kings because of me so that you may give your testimony to them and to the Gentiles. Whenever they hand you over, do not worry about how to speak or what you will say, because what you can say will be given to you at that moment . . . Everyone will hate you on account of my name. But whoever stands firm until the end will be saved. . .”

As you are aware by now, if you dutifully read my pastor’s article in *The Church Mouse*, your Church Council has recommended that the First Congregational United Church of Christ engage the Open and Affirming process as recommended and guided by the UCC Open and Affirming Coalition, an auxiliary to the national setting of the United Church of Christ. To begin this process demands a positive decision by the congregation, a vote coming near you soon. We are already a hospitably welcoming and inclusive congregation, our colorful, but fading, rainbow banner proudly adorning our building, setting us apart in a host of ways. Let us count them! Name them one by one! As we often say, it is time to put our money where our mouth is, to not only practice what we preach, but to preach what we practice. We cannot hide our distinct witness, our unique testimony, from the world even as it begins in this local community, the enclave known as Eagle River, Wisconsin. We must be bold, be brave, be strong, audaciously daring, have courage! Yes, we must “Be the Church!” After all, we indeed have what sadly is understood by many still to be an aberrational, alternative word to proclaim, a counter narrative to the traditional, the usual, the routine and ordinary. God’s infinite and eternal love should be mainline, mainstream, not an outlier! Who we are, what we do, matters! And it matters greatly! Our cause, the gospel cause, is decent, honorable, just, and sacred! Yes, the question every church in the universe must answer daily in every moment is, “What would Jesus do?” I think to come anywhere close to emulating

Jesus, we all know the answer. And I am quite certain we know what he would not do! Yes, he would now, as he did then, hospitably welcome and include all considered strangers until they are not, until they become his, and thus our, friends. As I have frequently said, our goal is to be a vibrant and vital, relevant and relational, congregation, always “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable! Kind of, sort of like, well maybe totally like, Jesus, our colleague and mentor, rabbi and friend!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains hospitably welcomes and includes everyone at the great banquet feast in the realm of God, here and now and in all eternity! Amen and amen.