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A New Way | *The Stranger*

Genesis 23:1-6

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Part of becoming a pastor is doing an internship. When I was in seminary, I chose the year long, full-time internship. I used it as an opportunity to go someplace that would be neat to live for a year, because you can do anything for a year. I was hoping for the Pacific Northwest. I ended up getting placed in Arizona. I have family that lives in Arizona, and it would be warm all year.

The place where I was going to live had a pool, so I wasn't mad about this. But I hadn't heard from the pastor of that congregation for a while, so Luther reached out. He said some stuff happened at the church and they won't be able to bring an intern in that environment. So, Luther told me that I could pick any place that was left, even sites from different seminaries. So, I decided on a church in Robeson PA. It's about 50 miles outside of Philadelphia.

Before I left, my grandma told me not to forget that we have Pennsylvania Dutch in our family history. I was like okay grandma!

Settling into Robeson was different. It was like stepping back in time. Not only did they use odd slang, outen the lights, Wicar instead of Vicar, but it was like stepping back in time. Oh, and they also hated outsiders! If you weren't born in Berks County, you aren't from there!

However, even with those warnings, the congregation was very warm and welcoming. I think by the time I left I had been to 80% of the members' homes and they were the largest church in Berks County. They took me all over the eastern side of the state. They took me to New York City. I heard a lot that I had fit in so well that it didn't even seem like I was an outsider. I always responded with well it's the congregation who helped me do that.....

I think this is a common theme in places. My first call was in Hibbing, up north. One of the members of the church I was serving told me that she isn't from Hibbing even though she had lived there for 60 years. She would say that people don't consider her a "Hibbingite" because she wasn't born there.

So, what does it mean to welcome the outsider, to show hospitality to the stranger?

Have you ever noticed that a lot of our conversations around hospitality are rather one sided? That is, we tend to talk about *our* hospitable nature, *our* hospitality as a spiritual gift, *our* "willingness" to extend hospitality, all the while patting ourselves on the back.

But in our scripture reading today, we hear about radical hospitality in a foreign land. Sarah has died and Abraham is trying to find a place to bury his wife. Him grieving looks like scrambling around trying to purchase a plot of land so that he can bury the dead. And if you don't read on, you might think that he is vulnerable and the Hittites would easily be able to get anything out of him. Dire times call for drastic measures. Instead of taking advantage of Abraham, they give him some land to bury Sarah. They ask for nothing in return. They see that this man, Abraham, needs someone to walk alongside and show him grace and love. So, he buries Sarah, which will also become the place where his immediate family will be buried with her.

He was trying to rely on himself, relying also on the generosity of the other to sell him land, but he got so much more. He ended up relying on the hospitality, the radical hospitality from the locals. Abraham is not part of their community. A stranger now seen and known.

When was the last time you accepted hospitality?
When was the last time you *relied* on hospitality?

I don't know about you, but my husband and I like to be the host who shows hospitality to others. We like to cook the food, control the music and activities, the smells, choose the beverages, and throw the party. However, this text teaches us something very different. Jesus, even, teaches us something very different. We are told or shown

that we must learn to be the guests of other people's hospitality.

Because it's one thing to be invited to dinner. It's quite another thing to wonder where dinner will come from if you are not.

According to Jesus, discipleship demands dependence on hospitality, and this dependence is not just doing it, but more so, receiving it. And needing it? Needing hospitality is a story that requires vulnerability and letting go. A story that gives up control and eases into risk. A story that anticipates rejection at every turn and yet gives witness to God's love regardless.

Of course, as you know, hospitality was indispensable in the ancient world. There were few restaurants or hotels along one's journeys on the dusty roads of the Middle East. Little travel was possible without the assumption and expectation of hospitality. In fact, there would hardly be a mission to the Gentiles without counting on the hospitality of the absolute other. But we should not let thousands of years and our taming of the Gospel to justify the claim that hospitality is any less essential now.

I think about what this text is calling us to do, to be. Are we sharing that radical hospitality of God with others? The type of welcome and hospitality that we share when we invite people to our homes should be mimicked and practiced in our churches. Because if people don't feel comfortable inside our community, then they won't be here long enough to enjoy the riches that it has to offer.

A theology of hospitality requires a reassessment of everything — practices, language, and symbols; rituals, confessions, sacraments, and rulings. Because to experience the kind of hospitality that Jesus has in mind is to experience the love of our God — so deep, so wide, so huge; the love of our God which shows mercy no matter what; the love of our God which became flesh so that the doors of the divine heart might be flung open to all.

After moving back to the Midwest from Pennsylvania, my brother-in-law's father had done some family history research on my dad's family. What we found was that our family had settled in

Berks County Pennsylvania and the cemetery that I lived by was where my family members were buried. Don't forget you are Pennsylvania Dutch. That is what it's like to receive radical hospitality from God. To be a stranger and welcomed.