

8.21.22 – Pentecost 11
“Are We Seeking Opportunities?”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Genesis 18:1-7 (NIV) ~ Pam

The Three Visitors

¹ The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

³ He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.”

“Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.”

⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three *seahs* of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it.

L: These are the Words of God. C: Thanks be to God!

Luke 11:5-13 (NIV) ~ Pam

⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Leader: These are the Words of Jesus. People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, we hear these parables and sometimes don’t understand the simple words. Thank you for our time together to figure them out. You remind us that we must be prepared at any time to be welcoming and willing to fill needs. Humble us Lord so that we may be more hospitable to others. Let us hear this week’s message of invitation, listening for your guidance as the Holy Spirit leads. Now speak through this messenger and give us ears to hear your divine voice. Amen.

Thank you to all who took a chance and came to Adult Vacation Bible School this week! I think it's safe to say we had some fun! And we learned three more parables and had food and fellowship together getting to know one another in a different context! Thank you, Martha, for inviting your lovely friend Carol, who we enjoyed getting to know. I especially thank our Administrative Assistant, for her help with the food items, setting up, and cleaning up. The experiment was successful and provided lessons on how we can do a slightly bigger program next year as an outreach to our community and other churches.

The study of "Kingdom on Earth" parables, *The Good Samaritan*, and this week's *Midnight Visitor* result from our progressive years together: 2019 = Transition, 2020 = Be Sustained, 2021 = Dream Dreams, and 2022 = "Listen for the Work." God is leading us forward and onward as a church and as disciples **still** growing spiritually, as our church covenant describes. Last week we witnessed generous and merciful hospitality on the road, as the Samaritan went about his life. Today, both passages present generous hospitality in one's home. Church growth movements over the last ten years used these examples to promote "Small Groups" that study and fellowship in the homes of members, and during pandemic, that switched over to Zoom, but they are struggling to regather. Other consultants suggest that growth happens with an outreach program called "Dinner Church," but even that poses health or food allergy challenges especially during pandemic and requires a large volunteer force. Our "Mission Center" approach is strong and has been duplicated by others; while it does not automatically grow the Sunday congregation, it does grow our ability to be good hosts and practice

Christian hospitality all through the week! There is no perfect church growth program and never has been! I say all this to remind you not to be discouraged in our vision! As you listen for God's voice showing us opportunities, remember that we are uniquely gifted as individuals and as a church to welcome others. We must just be aware and in prayer.

Let's start today's study with Abraham's visitors. Just before this passage, God made his covenant with Abraham about numerous descendants, male circumcision, and fatherhood at an old age. As Abraham was resting near his tent in the heat of the day, the Lord appeared to him. He had pitched his tent near a grove of towering oak trees; the trunk of this Oak of Mamre was 32 feet wide and located 30 kilometers south of Jerusalem in Hebron (which means "friend"). Abraham bowed to the three men approaching him out of respect. As was their custom in the day to welcome travelers, Abraham offered to be their host, wash their feet from travel, feed them, and share the shade of the big tree to let them rest. He ran to ask Sarah to make hearth cakes: "6 . . . 'Quick,' he said, 'get three *seahs* of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.'" A *seah* is equal to 144 medium eggs, or about **9 US quarts**. That is a lot! Abraham himself had a calf prepared with milk and curds and ate together with the men in the shade.

The bulletin cover is a famous Russian Icon depicting ideal Godly hospitality and the three visitors, as seen through Abraham's eyes. Who were the three and what was their purpose? The Lord and two angels came to reassure Abraham in his covenant, and to deliver the next bit of news that Sarah and Abraham would have a child of their own. Hagar had already birthed Ishmael, but the Lord announced the coming of Isaac, as a

reward for Abraham's faithfulness. This story becomes not just one of hospitality, but also an illustration of intimate, divine relationship and fellowship with God, much like we experience in Communion, table fellowship, and prayer. In Hebrews 13:1-2, the author reminds believers to "Keep on **loving** each other as brothers and sisters. ² Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!" Don't you think that God and his angels are guests worth entertaining?!

Luke's parable is a bit more complex. The beginning of Chapter 11 has the disciples asking Jesus what to pray for and how. He gives them the verses we know of as "The Lord's Prayer," then jumps right into a story of hospitality or lack thereof from a friend. Why would a visitor come around midnight? In today's world, that would be rude, unless expected. In Jesus' day, it was common for people to do their travelling at night when it was cool, so a midnight arrival was normal. However, all the food for that day had been consumed or given away. The host had to "borrow a cup of sugar" (*so to speak*) from a neighbor. The word "friend" means social equal, so the host assumed his friend would provide the needed bread. Interrupted in sleep, the friend says no; my door is locked, even the children are in bed, my food is put away too, so go away! Their friendship alone was not enough for the neighbor to help. But the host was persistent, and our translation says audacious enough to keep knocking; eventually the friend helps. Although it is a parable, selfish behavior rings true for us sometimes, doesn't it?

Many teachers stop there and use it to demonstrate the kind of hospitality that Abraham offers his divine guests; but Jesus' point is

explained in verses 9-13. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Remember that Jesus is still speaking of prayer and be careful here! It does NOT mean you must beat the door down to get God’s attention. NO. It does warn two things: 1.) that we often give up on situations or ourselves when God doesn’t answer prayer in our timing, and 2) when confronted with a particularly challenging illness or life situation, we must be persistent in our prayers, developing strong habits of prayer. Jesus knew his disciples would need this encouragement in the future after the cross and resurrection, when he would not be around to encourage their faith. Jesus told this parable to express human action and commitment to persevere in our faith. Our petitions and agony in prayer are explorations and the cementing of relationship with God to discover **His** will. By praying, we change our views and strengthen our faith because in our times together, God comforts, strengthens, encourages, and guides us.

It is like the intimate fellowship Abraham had with God and the angels that day because of his long-term routines of conversing through prayer and leaning on God, and the hospitality of that day was the **fruit** of that long-term intimate relationship. Jesus says that if a human father, even an evil one, can provide good gifts like fish and eggs, not snakes and scorpions, then how much more can we trust God, our loving, **heavenly** father, to provide good gifts to us? By gifts here, we mean abundance, yes, but Jesus means the Holy Spirit! He mentions “good gifts” and it is an early reference to the Advocate, the Comforter he will send after the cross and resurrection.

When we pray and do not receive immediate or tangible answers to those prayers, what happens? Do you pray harder? Do you pray more often, or try another type of prayer tool – a journal, meditation, prayer partners? Or do you get upset with God, lose your faith for a time, or break off the relationship and give up? This was an intense warning to the disciples and to us not to lose faith. Be persistent in prayer and fellowship with God. How are you doing in this area today? Let the Holy Spirit be your guide, and let's continue to listen for the work God is encouraging us to host. Only when we love others do we truly love the Lord! Amen! //

Will you pray with me? Lord, thank you for this reminder that you are the ultimate neighbor and host, transforming us and others who desire to know you. Help us to serve by prayer and listening first, then in our actions. Make us more hospitable to those in need. Let us pray more diligently to develop that close intimate trusting relationship with you. Let us share the Gospel in our doing and being. In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**