

Sept 24 – (Leader’s Guide) Genesis 18 – Hospitality to God

1. Do you sense that as a community we are ready, prepared to extend belonging to the other, the stranger, the marginalized? Why or why not?

This is simply a reflection question to begin to reflect on our readiness as a church to extend belonging to the other. As with other questions in this series that ask how we are doing as a church, I would love to hear any insights you think would be important for me to hear.

Invite honesty. Give opportunity for everyone to speak. Set the tone by keeping it short so that you can move into the meat of the study from a place of openness with one another and the established need for our hearts to be transformed.

Read Genesis 18

2. With three strangers arriving at his tent Abraham moves into action, formed by the muscle memory of Bedouin hospitality. What do we learn about hospitality to the other from this example? What impact would such hospitality have on the recipient? Giver?

He meets needs as they present themselves. Food for hunger pangs. Water for parched lips. Wet cloth for dry feet. Belonging to meet the loneliness of the open road.

Extravagance. There is a huge amount of flour used – 3 seahs – 18 litres – enough to make a large amount of bread. There is a prized calf butchered. Delicacy of goat curds and milk.

Deep respect. Abraham stands at the ready to serve whatever needs may present themselves.

The recipient has their most pressing needs met. Is shown how valued they are to the giver by both the extravagance and the respect given.

The giver is formed by this expression of hospitality to approach subsequent opportunities in the same manner. Seeing the response of the recipient, and experiencing their own joy in the giving a link is made in our neural pathway between joy and hospitality.

3. In this one interaction we see God’s tender mercy toward Sarah and his fiery judgment of Sodom. What do we learn about God’s mercy and his judgment from this story?

MERCY

It is tender. He will not repeat Sarah’s self-loathing.

It carries not an ounce of judgment even in the face of a bold-faced lie.

It responds by reaffirming the promise of his grace.

JUDGMENT

It is in response to the outcry – meaning the shrieks of torment of those under the boot of injustice.

It is measured. Only the witness of two angelic messengers will be taken to confirm the perceived assessment of the city's evil.

We can only say that God is good, that God is loving, IF he were to judge evil. A God who is not moved by the shrieks of the tormented would neither be good nor loving. It is his love that motivates his judgement.

Abraham's prayer sets up a principle. The presence of the righteous averts God's judgment.

4. How did the mercy and judgement of God shape Abraham's prayer?

He is committed to the justice of God. For God to be good and loving he must judge evil, but God's mercy shapes in Abraham's heart in deep love even for the perpetrators of evil

His prayer for the citizens of Sodom is formed by reflecting on God being merciful and just at the same time. Abraham is convinced that if God were truly just and merciful it would not be just to wipe away the righteous with the unrighteous.

His line of argument sets up a principle that will thread its way through the scriptures. The presence of the righteous turns away the judgment of God.

5. Such a heart change is available to all of us as we extend hospitality to God. In the sermon Tim mentioned from the text three principles of extending such hospitality. 1) Let God be God. 2) Be open and vulnerable with Him and 3) Receive the one to whom Abraham points. What impact does each have on our hearts? Which of the three did you personally resonate with and why?

I include here the unedited section of the sermon where I cover each of these to aid in leading the conversation:

First – we have to let God be God – we have to extend welcome to all of who God is – not just the parts we particularly like – in this story we would much rather linger on his tender mercy toward Sarah than his fiery judgment of Sodom – more often than not we choose to receive into our lives a God who doesn't offend us – who agrees with our own ideas of right and wrong – who never contradicts us – whose anger never burns against our sin – in some ways our God often becomes a

projection of our best selves – but Abraham receives both God’s mercy and judgement – his kindness and his wrath – his sovereignty and his humility - and it is the juxtaposition of these seemingly incompatible qualities – that shapes his heart to pray the way he prays – for only a God who is truly God can change shape mold and transform our hearts – for as my favourite preacher used to say often – if you don’t have a God who can tell you things you don’t want to hear – you don’t have a God who can tell you things that are too good to be true – let God be God.

Another principle here that guides our hospitality toward God - is that Abraham bares his heart – he takes a risk to be vulnerable before God – he disagrees with God’s course of action and he vocalizes it – he’s real with God – and as a result God shapes his heart.

You know I wish I had learned this sooner in my life of faith – but I would always try and present my best self before God – clean up my emotional life before coming to God in prayer – sanitize my requests – and it would always lead to the ugliness of my emotional life lingering far longer than needed - now I take my cue from the psalms – if I’m ticked at someone who has hurt me and desire them to be exposed –judged – I’ll pray it – if I’m envious of another - desiring what they have – desiring the honour they’ve received – I’ll pray it – why? Because it’s in my heart anyway – it’s not like I’m hiding it from him – but I have found over and over again that in those honest prayers – in that vulnerability before God I’ve been met – the holy Spirit addressing those things – healing those things by revealing the glory of God’s character – let God be God and be vulnerable / open with him.

A final principle of extending hospitality to God is that we must receive the one to whom Abraham points – we wonder why his prayer for Sodom stops at 10 – for I believe firmly that if he had kept going and said – ok ok – what if there’s five – would you spare Sodom for five righteous – God would have said – yes – I would spare it – ok ok how about one – if there was one righteous person – would you save Sodom for one righteous – the response would have been – indeed I would – indeed I would – for that is the glorious truth of the gospel – Jesus the only righteous one received in himself the just penalty for the sins of the whole world – and rising again brought forgiveness and new life to the many – the one righteous saved the whole.

And when we see this righteous one – this Jesus – we behold what Jonathon Edwards called his diverse excellencies which seem mutually exclusive – his majesty and yet complete humility – his perfect justice and yet boundless grace – his absolute sovereignty yet perfect submission, all sufficiency in himself and yet utter trust and dependence upon God – and when we get close to him – receive him – when his Spirit takes up residence in us – our hearts begin to reflect his heart – these excellencies forming us – changing our sense of self – our relationships – our engagement with our world – our pursuit of justice.

6. How can such an encounter with God's mercy and judgment in Jesus shape our hearts? (Perhaps consider how this impacts your sense of self, your relationships, and your engagement with matters of justice)

I include here the unedited section of the sermon where I cover each of these to aid in leading the conversation:

You see many of our broken relationships come about when one or both of us can't admit that we're wrong – that we've caused hurt - but the mixture of boldness and humility that comes with an encounter with Jesus can change all of that. Knowing who we are in Christ – loved – forgiven – chosen – delighted in – can instill in us the ability to listen to how another perceives where we've wronged them because our identity in Christ is secure – but we also know in light of the cross that evil runs straight through our hearts – the seed of every wrong exists within us – we know that at some level we are far worse than what they can possibly say of us – but with our identity secure in Christ we can admit where we're wrong – where we've caused hurt – setting a trajectory toward reconciliation.

Receiving Jesus also changes how we navigate justice.

When I pulled together the justice working group – that prayerfully discerned the hiring of Karen – and is currently discerning where God may be leading us as a congregation in this area – I remember vividly a conversation with one of the members - she works in an organization committed to justice – has many friends and family members in the field – and she was intrigued by how biblical justice may differ from a secular understanding of justice – and one of the things she was noticing was that much of the justice work around her was motivated by anger – and of course that makes absolute sense right? - to see those under the thumb of injustice – to hear their pain would rightly stir up anger – but the Jesus follower has something they can do with that anger – they can give it to God – they can say - God I believe – you have heard their shrieks of torment – I believe you are a God of justice and will rightly judge – you are coming again in judgment to make everything new – to make things right – and that isn't my job – I know in the end they will pay for their sins or Jesus has already paid for their sins – and if we give that anger – that desire for justice over to God – we are then freed to extend mercy love and grace not just to the victims of injustice but to the perpetrators of it.

Incidentally this truth can also free us from bitterness – anger – resentment personally - some of us are holding on to lingering hurt because we don't know what to do with our anger – an anger that desires justice – for wrongs to be punished – give it to God – he will judge – he's promised to do so – that person will pay for their sins – or Jesus has already done so – judgement is his job – give it to him - that you might be free.