

# "The 'Someone Else' Syndrome - Radical Hospitality"

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*Part I of "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations"*

Genesis 18:1-8-16

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I suspect every culture has some hospitality protocols. One of Buddhism's tenants is, "Treasure each present moment you have with others, because those moments may never happen again." The Hindu culture "...commands that the guest be treated as God; that one should also treat visiting enemies so well that they will forget their animosity." With Islam, "Whoever believes in Allah...let them treat their guests generously." In the historical culture of Judaism, hospitality is such that when one knows of strangers who are hungry or need a place to rest, it becomes a "legal obligation" to provide them with these things.

Few of us probably like to go "un-greeted," though on occasion we are. I suspect Jesus also did not like being "un-greeted," though on occasion He was. In the Gospel of Luke we find Him being turned away by a Samaritan village as He journeyed to Jerusalem (*Lk. 9:51-56*). The Samaritans would offer no help and no welcome to someone travelling to a religious festival at what they considered to be the wrong temple, which was how Samaritans viewed the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus was also turned away, or perhaps better said, "cast out," by family and friends in His hometown of Nazareth. Scripture says, "...and they took offense at Him" (*Mt. 13:54f*).

One could suggest this kind of inhospitable behavior toward Jesus and His disciples bordered on the abnormal, given how most people in that culture...and the Jews in particular...understood the obligations and requirements of hospitality. History tells us that in the ancient Mediterranean world, hospitality was seen as a sacred duty; an expression of righteousness. "The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible" tells us that a stranger entering a city would often go directly to a town square, or meeting place, and there, unless the stranger did something offensive, a towns person would step forward and invite the stranger into his home for food and lodging. (*"The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible," p. 654. Adpt. See also Ex. 23: 9; Lev 19:33; Deut 16:14; Lev. 19:34 as examples.*)

(Sidebar: I have to admit that I myself have never gone downtown to the Midland Center, or to the bus stop on Front Street, seen a stranger, and invited him or her into my home for a meal, a couple hours of television, and a bed for the night.)

In the New Testament we read often read that Jesus and His disciples found themselves in someone's house: dining with them, spending time with them, perhaps even residing with them for a while; relying on their hospitality (*e.g. Mt.*

8:20, 9:10; Mk. 7:24, 14:3). Mark 6:12 reads, "Then [Jesus] went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two..." As far as we know, they were not sent out with a VISA credit card and a McDonalds Gift Card in their wallets! They counted on the grace and benevolence of others for daily needs. The expectation was clear—ignore the laws of hospitality at your own peril!

One of the readings I studied had this to say: "In the ancient Near East, hospitality was the process of 'receiving' outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests" (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*, pp. 408-09). I like that..."...changing them from strangers to guests..." So great were the expectations of hospitality in biblical times that some scholars suggest the Book of Judges offers at least one instance when the *abuse* of hospitality nearly caused a civil war among the Hebrew tribes (*see Judges 19:20f*).

Throughout Scripture one finds examples of **radical, unexpected hospitality**. Lot was ready to risk his life and the honor of his daughters rather than transgress the laws of hospitality (*Gen. 19:1-8*). Laban showed extreme kindness to Jacob and Eliezer when they came to him as strangers (*Gen. 29:13*). Rahab was especially blessed for welcoming Joshua's spies and keeping them safe (*Josh. 2*). A Shunammite woman had a room especially built on her roof and then furnished it, all for a prophet who occasionally passed through her town (*2 Kings 4:8-11*). (How **radical** is that?) God sends the prophet, Elijah, to the town of Zaraphath and the house of a destitute widow and her young son. They were about to eat their last food...but the woman shares it with Elijah. Subsequently, her oil never runs out and her flour is constantly replenished (*1 Kings 17:8-12*).

Then we have today's story about Abraham. Let's look at the well-known story a bit closer to see what we often miss. Abraham runs from his tent to greet the strangers. He does not wait for *them* to come to *him*. He then bows before them, humbling himself as a servant (though he is quite clearly the "master" of his domain). Before the strangers can ask for anything, Abraham pleads with them to stay for a while so he can give them water, bread, and the coolness of his own tent, before they continue their journey. He asks his wife Sarah to make fresh bread using their *finest* flour—not their 2-star stock of flour but the 5-star stock of flour! He *personally* selects a calf from his flock and has his servant cook it for the strangers. And not just any calf, mind you, but a most "excellent" one. He himself brings the food and drink to the strangers, places everything before them, and, while they sit comfortably and eat, Abraham stands in their presence and waits patiently (as would a servant). After all this exceptional hospitality, Abraham does one more thing, and one could make a case it is *radical*. He not only shows the strangers the right direction to go, but he walks with them for a while to make sure they are safely on their way.

I know not about you, but it very hard for me to imagine myself in such a scenario. I encounter a stranger in the mall parking lot. I invite her to a nearby restaurant (because I worry about my house being presentable). I buy her the best meal on the menu. Then I stand next to the table while she sits and enjoys the food. When done, I drive her back to her car and give her directions to Lamesa. Plus, I follow her for about 3-4 miles north on Lamesa highway to make sure she is safely on her way. This is precisely the kind of **radical hospitality** Abraham offered these three strangers. Exceptional? Not in that time. Radical? Not in that time. Exceptional in today's North American culture? Yes. Radical in today's North American culture? Yes.

Now granted...it is a long way from Genesis to the Gospels. But in the Gospel of Luke we have the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (*Lk. 19:1-10*). Both men offered exceptional hospitality, but in different ways. Radical hospitality is not "kostenlos," as the Germans say. It is not free. It often comes with a price. It can cost you time and money. It can cost you energy and effort. It can cost you embarrassment. Sometimes it can even cost you family and friends! I guess one could say the price of "radical hospitality" might even be a "cross"!

When Abraham went out of his way to provide such hospitality, he did it himself. He did not tell one of his servants to do it. When Rehab was surprisingly hospitable to Joshua's spies, she herself did it.

I suppose it is human nature to notice visitors sitting in a pew and think, "I should say 'Hi' and maybe even invite them to lunch." But I'm sure *someone else* will. Or leave a Fellowship Dinner right after the meal and entertainment are over, thinking, "Maybe I should stay a while this time and help clean up. But surely someone else will." Or after enjoying the final performance of a school play or concert, thinking to stay awhile and help backstage. But then saying to yourself, "I'm sure someone else will go backstage and help take things down." Or reflecting on how wonderful our Food Pantry ministry is, and then thinking perhaps more help is needed. But someone else will most likely help." Or, "I'm really enjoy Thanksgiving. I've thought about helping at a local soup kitchen that day, serving food or greeting those who come, or just sitting at a table and listening to their stories. But someone else will certainly volunteer to do these things."

When our Lord spoke of how we need to show exceptional hospitality, was He mainly talking about *someone else* doing it? I wonder!

And Jesus said at the end of His parable of the injured Samaritan left on the road, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" [Another] said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "**Go and do likewise.**"