

Pentecost 5, Proper 6A
June 15, 2008

RCL
Genesis 18:1-15
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35—10:8

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Blessings to all you fathers on this Fathers' Day, and to all of you who have played the role of father to someone and who remember someone special who is or was fatherly to you.

I remember my Dad as a master of hospitality. Oh, it was Mom who made the preparations for guests, who cleaned the whole house like a white tornado and who prepared food and beverages and welcomed our visitors with genuine pleasure. But it was also Mom who rarely sat down. There was always something she needed to get up and get – more iced tea, refill the snack dishes, check on the pot roast. It was my Dad who sat with our company and gave them his attention. They were a great pair, complementing each other so well. But on this Dads' day I want to focus on my father's strength, giving his attention to whomever was with him. This, I think, is the essence of hospitality.

Driving to Trinity Commons earlier this week in late morning, I had the opportunity to hear a favorite radio program that I usually have to miss. It's the Diane Rehm Show, an informative and stimulating talk show whose host is a brilliant woman and an active Episcopalian. Diane was talking with Maggie Jackson, the author of a new book entitled "Distracted: the Erosion of Attention and the coming Dark Age." Clearly Ms Jackson feels our lack of ability to give our attention to things and people for any length of time is not leading us to a good place. When we tend to deal with issues and indeed with people only at a surface level, she says, we give up the possibility of a deep understanding. The Dark Age of which the book's title speaks is a time of no depth, of little knowledge of what's going on in the world, indeed, a time of little concern about anything outside ourselves. I haven't yet read the book but I intend to, so you may be hearing more about its thesis in the future. Being attentive is clearly a vital part of developing a deep faith.

And Holy Scripture, for those who are listening, teaches the importance of depth. "Go out into deeper water," Jesus advised the fishermen who would become his disciples, "and cast your nets over the side." And from the deeper place they hauled their nets in, filled to overflowing with fish.

Abraham shows us depth in the hospitality he extends to the three men who come to him by the oaks of Mamre in today's reading from the book of Genesis. God comes as the community God is, as one who is three. And Abraham, though it is hot and he has been resting in the shade of his tent, jumps up and runs to them, imploring them to stay.

Then comes the preparation of food and drink and the washing of their feet, making them comfortable in the shade of one of the trees. And when they eat, Abraham stands by them, giving his full attention to them. Complete hospitality to strangers. Later the author of the letter to the Hebrews will write, "Remember to show

hospitality to strangers. By doing so some have entertained angels unawares.” Abraham entertains angels. Indeed, he entertains God, providing comfort and sustenance and welcome, the kind of complete welcome in which he gives his full attention to the guests.

What does it take to give our full attention to another? Obviously we have to stop doing all the talking. It takes a willingness to be quiet and listen. It takes openness to the other, a receptivity to what the person needs, or to what she has to say, or to how he is feeling. It may take time. It may interrupt what we thought we were going to be doing. It may require putting off what we thought was most important. The opportunity to show hospitality may come without warning, as it did to Abraham. When it comes, it comes as gift. Because when we extend ourselves to each other deeply, giving our full attention, we offer ourselves to the Christ in each other.

For Abraham there was a reward for his hospitality. Actually, it was a reward for his faithfulness to God in many things. And it was a colossal reward – that Abraham would indeed be the father of nations, with as many descendants as there were stars in the sky, as God had promised (Happy Fathers’ Day, Abraham!). And this would happen through his own wife, Sarah.

Sarah laughed when she heard. I love the picture of Sarah laughing. No hardness of heart in her, just incredulity. “What?! That’s preposterous. I’m in my nineties,” she thinks to herself. “The time for childbearing is more than a little over.” And later, Sarah laughed again, this time for joy, an old woman holding a baby named *Yitzak*, Isaac, which means ‘to laugh.’ ‘Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?’

I think we had a tendency to laugh a bit when the Diocese of Ohio awarded a grant to All Saints to revitalize this parish. Could this little parish in Parma achieve new life? Could there be a Sunday School again? A choir? Would contributions to the parish ever be enough to get away from the annual deficit budget hanging over our head? Thinking of growth seemed preposterous in a city that’s shrinking instead of growing. There may have been some laughter, though, as I recall, the tendency was more toward long faces. But there is a new depth, a new joy evident here. We’re not a lot bigger in numbers but we have many many more people participating in parish work, initiating new ideas, spending their time and energy serving here. More of us are giving our attention to the work of Jesus in the world, and I believe it has come from increased hospitality toward others and toward God.

Because ultimately extending ourselves to others, opening ourselves to listen to someone else, is practice for entertaining God. Giving our full attention to God is our goal as followers of Christ. Giving our full attention to God shows our trust in God’s love. Giving our full attention to God is to be open to the infinite possibility of God. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Abraham was open to the Almighty and faithful in his response to God. Jesus would have us respond in the same way Abraham did, and follow his command to go out into the world, among those who, harassed and helpless, wander as sheep without a shepherd, those who, according to Maggie Jackson’s book are distracted and whose ability to pay attention is eroded. Jesus would have us heal each other by proclaiming the good

news. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, he commands his disciples. Jesus gives authority to all who are baptized to heal in his name. And he tells his disciples to look for those who are paying attention. They are the ones who will be able to listen.

But before we can recognize the authority that is within us to do that, the authority given to us by God, we must first practice that open attentiveness to God and to the Word of his Son, Jesus.

Every time a passenger airplane flight takes off in this country one of the stewardesses will illustrate what to do if there's trouble. We take this in stride, trying hard not to think about any of it actually happening. And one of them will announce, "In the event the cabin becomes depressurized, oxygen masks will appear from the panel over your head. If you are traveling with a small child, secure your own oxygen mask first before helping the child to secure his." I remember thinking that sounded like a selfish thing to do, to put your own mask on first, until it was pointed out to me that I could only help someone else if I were able to breathe and function well myself.

When it comes to doing the work Christ sends us out to do because "the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few," we need to be breathing deeply ourselves and functioning well. So practice hospitality toward friend and stranger and give your attention to God, to the Holy Spirit working in your life and in the life of this community.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria