**Genesis 18:1-14** July 17, 2022

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 *Genesis 18:1 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. 2Abraham 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. 3He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. 4Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. 5Let 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.” 6So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” 7Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.*

 *9“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There, in the tent,” he said. 10Then the Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. 11Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. 12So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” 13Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ 14Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**You Can’t Outgive THE GIVER**

 Something I have observed far more often than done… If you cook a special meal for a bunch of people, four or five or more, and you nail it, there is a special satisfaction. People love the food. They eat as much as they want, and at the end, they don’t rush off, but just sit there—sort of like dogs after a good meal—reveling in that feeling of contentment and fullness. To be the cook or chef who takes people from being hungry, maybe even a little bit grouchy and impatient, to completely happy and satisfied is special.

 That is the magic of the traditional Sunday dinner. People gather around the table after church, eat a meal together, probably the best meal of the whole week in the aftershadow of God’s house. Often, there isn’t much else to do for the afternoon, so people sit around enjoying each other’s company. Growing up, I thought of Sunday dinner and the two hours after as a little slice of heaven.

 That was what Abraham wanted to create when he saw three strangers on his doorstep. Shaking off his siesta, his mind quickly worked on how he could properly receive his guests. When he saw the strangers, he didn’t eye them suspiciously like a sheriff in some rough and tumble Western, “Ain’t seen you ’round these parts before.” No, old man Abraham saw them, got up, and hurried to them as if they were long expected family from distant places. He begged them to interrupt their journey for a moment of hospitality at his place. He would bring refreshing water for their sandaled feet. They could rest in the shade, while he made their stop worthwhile and brought them ***“a morsel of bread”*** (KJV). Of course, Abraham had in mind to give them more than a morsel.

 What’s going on? Dare I say, “This is worship”? In one corner we have Abraham, but who is in the other? Who are the strangers? The first verse tells us, ***“The Lord appeared to Abraham…”*** All that Abraham offers to these travelers he offers to the Lord of heaven and earth.

 As Christians, we find this encounter very interesting! The Lord God appears to a believer as just another person. It brings questions to our minds. “*Three* visitors! Is this the Trinity?” It’s a reasonable thought because our reading connects the *three* visitors with the Lord. Yet, as the story unfolds in chapters 18 and 19, two of these three are identified as angels.

 Then there is another question: Did Abraham know who stood before him? Did he realize that it was God himself? By the end of our reading there could have been no doubt in Abraham’s mind, but at first he seems not to have known.

 That, however, brings us round to another question. I suggested that Abraham’s hospitality is worship. That would make sense if Abraham knew before whom he was standing, but he didn’t. Of course, if he didn’t know it was God himself, Abraham must have thought his visitors people, and Abraham being the religious person that he was could never have “worshiped” them. Am I wrong to call it worship?

 Somewhere else Jesus says, *“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”* (Mt 25:40). And elsewhere God’s Word states, *“Whoever is kind to the needy honors God”* (Prov 14:31).

 Yes, each act a child of God does according to God’s will, out of nothing but sheer joy and thankfulness for what God has done, *that* is an act of worship. It fulfills God’s purpose for us. You see, God’s purpose for us is not to look out for number one. The world tells us that all the time, but that one’s not in the Bible. The Bible does say that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God and the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor.

 And so Abraham running up to these three men, eager to serve, not out of a desire to get something for himself – oh, so many think that’s what church is about, what praying is about, even what Christianity is about: getting what I think I need. No, Abraham was about service. When Abraham’s mysterious visitors accepted his invitation and said, ***“Very well, do as you say,”*** he hurried to the tent to Sarah. ***“Quick, get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.”*** Do you know how much flour that is? About 25 pounds! Typical patriarchy, right? Quick, find the wife and tell her to make the biggest batch of bread she’s ever made. Well, not so fast! ***“Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it.”*** This ***“morsel of bread”*** is turning into quite a meal; meat didn’t cross the table every day in the ancient world. Then the meal goes from generous to extravagant. ***“He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them.”*** And then, and then, ***“He stood near them under a tree.”*** What would you think of someone standing there watching you eat? A little weird? A little annoying? Is Abraham such a narcissist that he needs to hear a compliment? Our culture is so different, not wrong, just so different that we miss so much! In standing near them, paying attention to every bite they took, Abraham, one of the richest and most powerful of men in all of Palestine, made himself the personal servant of his three guests. To have sat down in some familiar way like we would… No, he would stand and serve. It was this child of God’s act of worship.

 What do you think the Lord thought? I don’t know what he thought, but here’s what he did, ***“and they did eat”*** (KJV). The Creator of the universe took the meal presented by the hand of one of his lowly creatures—and He ate.

 Is this not what we long for in worship? Do we not hunger for a verification of our acceptance by Him? Do we not desire, in helping our neighbor, taking care of our family, doing our job well, do we not desire to know that God simply and graciously receives our gift? And he does! For the sake of the life and death of Jesus Christ, he accepts all that is offered in thanksgiving to him and for our fellow man.

 This meal beneath the great trees of Mamre is among the most amazing things in the Bible. Dare I say it, in a way this is more amazing even than our Lord Jesus Christ coming to earth to save us sinners. It is one thing for God to give to needy sinners, it is another for Him who needs nothing to receive from them! And yet this is written across the pages of the Scriptures. When that woman broke the jar of perfume over Jesus’ feet, he said, *“She has done a beautiful thing… wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”* When Noah in the aftermath of the flood made a sacrifice of thanksgiving, *“The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma…”* “Pleasing”—it used that word! Jesus promised that the servants who take God’s talents and use them faithfully will one day hear the commendation, *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”* And as Abraham stood by under the great trees at Mamre, the Lord did eat. It was a Sunday dinner of Sunday dinners.

 And so while there is the great truth of Romans 11:35, *“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?”* —he needs none of what I can give him—nonetheless God *does* let us give to him. That God would take anything that I can offer and be pleased, is that not a miracle of God’s love and mercy? Christians, take heart. God knows! He enjoys!

**II.** Yet more happened in the shade of those great trees. What happens next answers one of the big questions: What happens in worship? Why worship?

 Why do we gather on Sunday mornings? Is it about us giving to God? Is it about us giving an hour – or if you count getting ready and drive time and Bible class, make it three hours given to God? Is it worth it? Do I get a fair return on the 2, or 20, or 200 bucks I put in the offering plate? Do I get enough out of a worship service to pay for my loss of Sunday overtime income, the inconvenience to my schedule?

 What did Abraham find in this matter? Did he get his money’s worth out of the fancy meal he set before three strangers, his act of worship? You know what? I’ll bet that thought, the arithmetic of a cost-benefit analysis on his hospitality and generosity never even crossed his mind—God be praised!

 It is just too easy for us to fall into a bookkeeping mentality when we serve God. God forgive us, when we start to measure heaven with the yardstick of earth, when we start to think that what we give to God is a loss to us, or even worse, that it is a necessary cost of doing business with God. When we imagine that we lose when we give to God, or when we relegate our relationship with God to a transactional relationship, these are thoughts unworthy of our God and unworthy of Christians, too! God forgive us!

 Having said that, what did Abraham find in this matter? He found out what all—every single one—what all Christians find out when they give to God: God gives us more. That’s not why we give, but it is our confidence when we do give. Let me repeat that. That God always gives us more than we give should never be our reason for giving, but our confidence in giving.

 You see, 25 years before the event in front of us today, Abraham had moved to “The Promised Land.” And God had promised the already late-middle age Abraham a son and family to inherit that promised land. Twenty-five years later, no son. Now he and Sarah were both beyond the age when a child was even possible. But just days or weeks before this event, God had appeared to Abraham in a vision, and promised that a son would be borne within twelve months.

 He had had that vision and promise, but Sarah only heard it second hand. When she had married Abraham decades earlier, she unknowingly signed up for life in a strange land, living in a tent, moving as strangers from place to place, and more than two decades of God’s unfulfilled promise of a child. And she didn’t even get to see the vision like her husband!

 And so after eating that meal, the visitors asked their host, ***“Where is your wife Sarah?”*** They came with a message for her, who as in the custom of the time, did not show her face, but listened from behind the canvas of her tent. ***“Then the Lord said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’”***

 For Sarah who had given up on the one great hope of her heart, these words were spoken. Now who gave more? Sarah, kneading 25 pounds of bread flour to put in front of strangers at her husband’s whim, or the one who promised her a child within twelve months.

 This is that Christians find when they measure their lives. Yes, you may have given thousands of dollars to the church over the years, maybe tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. But who has given more. You to God or God to you? Yes, you may have given two, three, four hours a week for Sunday School, or keyboarding, or cleaning, or as a councilman, not counting all the time in worship; times 52 weeks a year, times 20, 40, 60 years which all added together would be literally sitting at a church day and night for a year or two or three. But who has given more? You to God, or God to you? Think of the things, the possibilities, the pleasures, yes, the temptations, that you have given up for God over the years? Yet who has given up more? You or God?

 Look around in your life, and while you will find troubles, sorrows and stress, you know that counting all of God’s blessings both here and in eternity are testimony to the truth that just like Abraham under those great trees of Mamre, you have been far more blessed by God, than what you have given to him.

 And so it is in worship. We may give a little of our time, some of our treasure, and a little of our abilities, yes, even here in the worship service. And God is pleased with it! Yet we know that we never leave this place of worship with less than we started with. God blesses us through the Word that gives us hope and guidance. Here, in Communion, we receive that which won our forgiveness on a cross, and that same body and blood bind us together and strengthen us to overcome and march into heaven victorious. In God’s house, spiritual truths set to music strengthen our hearts. Here, the fellowship of other Christians galvanizes us in the rightness of our values, our hopes, our faith.

 So, while in weekly worship I give my best to God, like Abraham, I know that God gives even more of his best to me. Amen.