

Sermon on June 14, 2020 for the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6

By Sister Deborah Francis

Our reading from Genesis is one of my favorite Bible stories. Talk about entertaining angels unaware! Previously, God had spoken to Abram and made a covenant with him. God changed his name to Abraham which means Father of Multitudes. Abraham counters by pointing out the impossibility of being the Father of Multitudes since he is childless and has no heir.

God declares that Sarah will give birth to a son who will be his heir. At this point, Abraham laughs in rejoicing (according to the Tanakh) because he believes God's promise.

Sarah had not been able to conceive a child. In addition, she was past menopause. In the culture of that time, barrenness was regarded as a great misfortune and possibly a punishment from God. Children, as your descendants, would keep your memory alive and take care of you in your old age. Abraham's line could not continue if Sarah could not produce a son.

In our story today, Abraham is sitting under the Oaks of Mamre in the heat of the day. Suddenly, he sees three men standing near him. He runs up to them and bows. He offers to bring water to wash their feet and bids them stop for a while and rest under the trees.

But that is not all he does – he rushes to Sarah in the tent and tells her to make bread.

Meanwhile, Abraham has a servant slaughter and roast a calf. He presents his guests with meat, bread, curds and milk.

This must seem over the top to us but this kind of hospitality is still practiced by Bedouins today. In the desert, hospitality can mean the difference between life and death. One of the men tells Abraham that he will return next year, in due season, and Sarah will have a son. Sarah is eavesdropping at the door of the tent and she laughs. I find this endearing. I would have laughed too. Of course she laughs. She is 90 and Abraham is 100 years old. The stranger asks why she laughed and at first she denies it but she has been caught in the act. The stranger says "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" And indeed, when Abraham is 100 years old, Sarah gives birth to a son whose name is Isaac which means laughter.

St. Benedict instructed his monks to receive all guests as if they were Christ. Hospitality is, in fact, commended to all Christians. And not just hospitality to strangers.

Hospitality comes first and foremost from within. It involves our openness to seeing God in others. It's a response of our whole selves, not just our spiritual selves. The New Interpreter's Bible comments "Sometimes we are not able to identify the presence of God in the midst of life. God assumes flesh and blood in the neighbor."

In this section of this letter to the Romans, Paul says we are justified by faith and so have peace with God. Now, Justification can be thought of as a legal transaction: Jesus died so that our standing with God could be restored to what it was before sin and death became our lot through Adam. But - Is that all? Is it just fire insurance?

Justification is just the beginning of salvation. It offers us an entrance to God's presence. What has been broken by sin is our life with God. Our legal standing having been righted by Jesus' death on the Cross is not enough.

What we desperately need is a restoration of our relationship with God. This comes not because we have faith not in ourselves or that we placated God not by our good and righteous lifestyle but by faith in Jesus who repairs what we were unable to repair. What Jesus offers us from the Cross is forgiveness of our sins. God is not waiting for us to perfect ourselves. As Jesus said, he came not to call the righteous but sinners. As Paul says in this letter, "God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. As a result, we have peace with God whose love is poured into us by Grace through the Holy Spirit."

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is going to villages and towns teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and healing sicknesses and diseases. He has compassion for the crowds and compares them to sheep without a shepherd.

He calls his disciples to him and likens the crows to a ripe harvest. The problem is that there are few laborers to reap it. It reminds me of farmers forced to plow up their crops for lack of

harvesters which leads to shortages in the supermarkets. Of course – Jesus is talking about people, not vegetables.

Jesus is about to expand his ministry, so that the harvest may be gathered. He summons his twelve disciples whom he calls Apostles - those who are sent out. Why twelve? Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel. It was important symbolism for Jesus and Matthew and Matthew's community. Now if you are ever a contestant on Jeopardy you are prepared with the answer.

Who are these disciples? They are close companions of Jesus who have witnessed teaching, miracles and healings. They are not a particularly impressive bunch. They include 4 fishermen, a tax collector and Simon the Canaanite – aka the Zealot. We know only the names of the others. Jesus prepares them to go out by giving them his authority to cast out unclean spirits and heal diseases.

I find this reassuring. Jesus not only chooses ordinary people like you and me for ministry but gives us the training and gifts we will need.

Why did Jesus only send the Apostles to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and not to the Gentiles or the Samaritans? Because they would not get a ready hearing among the philosophical Greeks or the Samaritans. Jesus felt that God had called him only to Israel. There are hints that Jesus was broadening his outreach. For instance, his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. The great outreach to the Gentiles and the Samaritans would come only after Easter and the conversion of Paul.

Consider your life: How has Jesus prepared you to minister in his name? There is a vast harvest beyond our walls: the anxious, the despairing, the fearful, the confused, the lonely and the seekers. There has never been as much need for compassion and healing as there is right now.