

Alien Transformation

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
May 11, 2014
by Carol Penner
Text: Genesis 18:1-15

The story we read today from Genesis is about transformation. At the beginning of the story we have three men appearing out of nowhere at the door of Abraham's tent. They are strangers, aliens. But at the end of the story they are honoured guests. A transformation has happened.

It's a hot day in Mamre, when the strangers appear. Abraham is sitting at the door of his tent, trying to catch a breeze. When he sees the strangers, he **runs** to them...he doesn't just saunter over. He offers them a little water to wash their feet, and a little bread to refresh them. When they accept his offer and sit down under the shade of a tree, Abraham pulls out all the stops. He offered to serve them a little bread, but then he instructs his wife to use three measures of flour to make the bread. That's 20 quarts of flour...there's going to be leftovers! Then he chooses a calf, and has his servant kill it, even though he didn't tell the strangers he was going to give them meat. He has all this prepared and he brings it to the men formerly known as strangers, now known as honoured guests. He stands beside them while they eat.

We look at this story, and we think, "Boy, that Abraham, he sure is putting on the ritz for these strangers, what a guy!" But for the average Ancient Near East person reading this story, they'd just go, "So?" Abraham was not some maverick hospitality guru breaking social norms...on the contrary, he was doing exactly what was encouraged and expected by his culture...archeologists and sociologists all tell us that hospitality was a moral pillar of the ancient near east. In a harsh climate, where death from thirst and hunger and heat was commonplace, hospitality for strangers was expected, and it was a cultural norm to do more than you offered.

This is an early story in the history of the Jewish faith. As Abraham and his descendants developed a relationship with God, the moral pillar of hospitality was incorporated into their belief system. Hospitality now wasn't just something their culture expected of them, it was something Jahweh expected. "Love the alien!", God commands. "Love the sojourner in your midst."

The culture of hospitality is reflected in Hebrew scriptures and then in Christian scriptures, not just in commandments, but in story after story. If I asked you to think of examples of people in the Bible who show hospitality, I am pretty sure we could come up with a couple of dozen examples in a minute or two. From the story of Boaz and Ruth, to the story of the Good Samaritan, over and over again, hospitality is at the heart of the Jewish and Christian faith. Take the stranger/the alien/the wayfarer/the foreigner/the sojourner and transform them into your guest.

I want to talk about the Greek New Testament word for hospitality but before I do that, let's look at an English word. Have you ever heard the word xenophobia? That's an English word made from two Greek words. You know what phobia means, it means fear. *Xenos* means stranger, so xenophobia means fear of strangers. If you know this word it will help you understand the Greek word for hospitality.

In New Testament Greek the word for hospitality is *philoxenia*. There's that *xenos* root again, meaning stranger. But this time it is linked to *philo* which means to love, love the stranger.

In the late 1600s, when the Quaker William Penn founded a colony of immigrants in Pennsylvania, he tried to think of a good name for his capital city. He decided to call it ...Philadelphia. Love (*philo*) and brother (*adelphi*); the city of brotherly love. Imagine if William Penn had called his city, Philoxenia, a city where strangers are loved!

Imagine if our church was named Philoxenia Mennonite church...Hospitality Mennonite Church. I pastored a church called "the Welcome Inn"...a place where everyone received a welcome. They wanted to put hospitality front and centre, right in their name.

Today, a place or a group centred around philoxenia, or hospitality, is counter cultural. We still have hospitality in our society, don't get me wrong! But in our world, the word hospitality is linked with the word industry. We have a hospitality industry, because a lot of people make money through hospitality. Hospitality has been monetized, it's a commodity that you trade. It's not a free gift, it has become an economic transaction.

Our culture today is very different that the Ancient Near East, for lots of reasons. For one thing, there are a lot more strangers. The Ancient Near East didn't have as many strangers as we do today, because people stayed put, they just didn't travel as often as we do. And they mostly lived in smaller communities and knew each other. But the beginnings of modern culture started in the Roman Era, when the empire built a vast network of roads. For the first time in Western society, it was safe and convenient to travel long distances from the place where you were born. It was the beginning of the portable society...

And with more strangers, the practice of hospitality as a cultural norm fell by the wayside in most Western cultures. *Philoxenia* as a cultural norm became replaced with xenophobia, a fear of strangers. Stranger rhymes with danger.

Imagine if you're watching a movie; the opening credits come on, and you see the wide angle shot of a beautiful town, peaceful and lovely, with people happily going about their business. But the camera pans over and you can see in the distance, on the horizon, there's a lone man walking towards the town. Now freeze that frame. We can stop right there, and as a culture, we can guess where this movie is going. You know the stranger coming into town is not good. That man's a serial killer. That's the way the story goes...some gullible person is nice to this guy and the next thing you know, it's a ghost town, and there are bodies everywhere. There are countless movies made with this sort of theme, this sort of plot-line. That's the type of story our society repeats to itself, and it influences a lot of things we do, from how we react to people on the street, to how we treat refugees. Stranger rhymes with danger.

Now we are not so different, us and the ancient near east. There was a fear of strangers in the ancient near east too. It's only human. Think about Abraham. Who knows what those three strangers would be capable of...stealing some cows, or kidnapping your slaves, or just going on a rampage. Human nature hasn't changed that much, strangers are a threat! The way the Ancient Near East dealt with the threat of strangers was to transform them into guests. There was a moral code that if you were accepted as a guest, it was unthinkable for the host to hurt the guest, or the guest to hurt the host.

Like the Ancient Near East, we have a fear of strangers. What is different is what we do in the response to that threat. We give up on the transforming thing. And yet, as a culture we don't necessarily want people perishing on our doorstep, so we set up an economic system so that strangers can get food and shelter safely, so they don't have to steal our food to survive, or break into our houses to find a place to sleep. And for people who have no money, there are social agencies to deal with hunger and shelter (with more or less success).

And to enforce this way of coping with strangers, we have doors that lock, security cameras, police forces. If you live in the United States, everyone has a gun it seems. And finally, we have a huge cultural capacity to walk by strangers who are suffering. That's how we cope with strangers. We look at them and think "Not my problem." We don't run to them—we walk by them. We ignore them. Our culture does not encourage us to take personal responsibility for the well-being of strangers that we meet. In fact, it discourages us from doing that. What! You opened your door to that guy? What! You sat down and talked to that homeless person! Crazy!

That's why when we read the Old Testament and the New Testament about the call to hospitality, for us it is counter-cultural. When we become Christians, when we put our membership in the kingdom of God, we are transformed, and we become in some ways alien to the society where we were born. We have a different way of thinking, a different way of doing as Christians. It's a type of alien transformation, with us changing from the people who are part of society, into something different. We follow the rules of God's land...and that means we are called to practice hospitality, *philoxenia*.

And we are not supposed to just do that as individuals, but we are called to do that as a community. The church is an open-door policy place; we are a public place, where we invite anyone to walk in. We encourage strangers to join us. In fact that is our *raison d'être* to share the good news with everyone we meet, and encourage them to join us in following Jesus.

The power of one person showing hospitality is amazing, but the power of a community is even greater, because our hospitality together is stronger than our hospitality alone. Together, we encourage each other to greater acts of hospitality.

This has been true in church history. In Medieval Europe communities of Christians started hospitals. In the Middle Ages, when you had nowhere to turn, when you had a contagious disease, or were old and destitute, you could go to the monastery or the convent. The Christian brothers and sisters would take care of you. Today our hospitals still have connections with Christian orders, the Misericordia sisters, the Grey Nuns, reminding us that Christian communities were places of hospitality that made a practical difference in our community.

What about today, how can Christian communities make a difference today?

Let me give you an example. In a church I used to attend there were two people who were always showing hospitality to strangers. I'll call them Jane and Harold. They were always inviting strangers to their house. They would meet someone while biking on a bike path and invite them over for supper. They would befriend a foreign student at the local university, he was at all their family holidays for a couple of years, and then before you knew it, they would be hosting his whole extended family from Pakistan for a three week visit. And they loved it! That was the kind of people they were. Hospitality was an important way they lived out their faith.

Now that wasn't normal behavior for our Canadian culture, they were pretty unusual, and you might just chalk that up to one crazy family in our church. But then there was another man in our church, he was always talking to people on the street, listening to their stories. He would always have a story to share about another interesting person that he meant. And then there was that group of people from my church who volunteered to serve on our refugee committee, and they welcomed a family from Columbia with open arms, spending so much time with them, and inviting them to family holiday events.

And then there was another couple who heard about some fifteen year old students from Afghanistan who had just crossed into Canada, and were claiming refugee status. They needed homes. I saw this person take one of the students into his house for a year so he could finish high school. Not only that, he went around calling all his friends and relatives, looking for more homes for the other young people. With their encouragement, another family in the church decided to take in one of these Afghani students.

Now all the time this is happening, where am I? I am the person pretty much middle of the road Canadian, looking at Harold and Jane, saying, well, they always were a little bit eccentric. I could never see myself doing that...what would I say to people from another culture, that would be awkward, I'd hate to have strangers in my house all year long. But as I'm watching, I see more and more people in my church start offering hospitality to strangers...and soon it becomes not, those people are pretty eccentric, but rather, that's what we do around here, and eventually it comes down to "why am I not offering hospitality to strangers?" Because the cultural norm in my church became one of welcoming strangers.

You can call that the Holy Spirit working. You can call that following Jesus. You can call that catching philoxenia; it's terribly contagious. And Eugene and I caught it too. We were not the welcoming strangers sort of people, and yet with the influence of all those around us, we ended up inviting one of the Afghani students I told you about to live with us for the summer.

What happens to Abraham when he welcomes the three strangers? The story, of course, is that the strangers were actually angels, and they come with the best news that Abraham will ever hear. Abraham and Sarah's prayers are about to be answered.

Over and over again in scripture, strangers offer gifts. In Abraham and Sarah's case it is the good news of a baby. Or think of the people on the road to Emmaus, welcoming the stranger, who turns out to be Jesus, who gives them good news of the resurrection. Jesus tells his disciples that he will appear in the disguise of the stranger; and whenever the stranger is fed or given something to drink or welcomed, or clothed...it is as if we were welcoming Jesus himself.

For many of the people I know, welcoming the stranger has been transformative. The stranger's life is transformed, as they become a guest, who is honoured and welcomed. But the hosts too are transformed by the story of the one who was formerly a stranger.

This was the case with Eugene and I; we so appreciated getting to know Parwaiz, the young man from Afghanistan, he is a good friend now. He was living with us last summer as Eugene and I were trying to decide whether to make a move to Alberta. We really hadn't told any of our friends that we were thinking of doing this. But Parwaiz was living with us, and so one evening we laid out the options we were considering, and the basic pros and cons, and we asked him, "What do you think we should do, should we move to Alberta?"

He thought for a short moment, and then he sort of tilted his head and asked, "Will they kill you in Alberta?" We sat there sort of stunned, and then shook our heads, and said, "No they won't kill us in Alberta." "Well then," he replied, "It's a good place to live. In my country if we are thinking of moving, the first thing we ask ourselves is, 'Will they kill us in this new place?' and if they won't kill us, then it's a good place to live."

Parwaiz left his family and his home at the age of 15, and has made a new life in Canada far from everyone he knew and loved. His words were very helpful to us. And here we are!

Now not every story about welcoming strangers is a smooth story with a happy ending. Jesus came into the world as a stranger. People didn't know who he was or what he was there for. He trusted himself to strangers. And we all know how that worked out. It isn't always an easy road being hospitable. Sometimes you receive great gifts, great rewards, but sometimes there is a heavy price to pay. But no matter, as a member of the kingdom, this is what we are called to do and be.

What does it mean for Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church as we take these scriptures seriously...as we think of the name Philoxenia Mennonite Church? How do we open our arms to strangers? Who are the strangers that we are being called to welcome? Does this become a norm, a moral pillar in our society that is so commonplace that if we don't do this, we wonder how we can fit in? I have not been here very long but I have seen a lot of hospitality.

- I see people welcoming strangers who have come in for a worship service...not just with the words, "I'm glad you're here" but with actions that back that up, Eugene and I have experienced this hospitality
- I see a group of our young women this week welcoming people...they travelled to the prison for women and offered a Pilates class there
- I see people working at the Welcome Centre, that helps homeless people in our neighbourhood
- I see people creating school kits and warm blankets to help others
- I think of Heidi Kornelson, who I visited with in the hospital this week, reaching out to the other women in our hospital room with friendly words of concern and care

Hospitality is being offered by people in our community...aliens and strangers are being transformed into honoured guests. We live with our eyes open, we see each other's acts of hospitality and it spurs us on. It becomes our identity.

This week people will arrive at the door of our tent, or at our office, or on the path in front of us. And we are going to have a choice to make. The question is not, "What do I feel like doing? What would other people in Edmonton do?" but rather, "What does God require of me? What would my church community have me do?"

We grow up being told everywhere that stranger rhymes with danger. But it's in the church community that we learn that stranger rhymes with manger. Jesus comes as Immanuel, God with us, in the face of the strangers that we will meet this week.