

## FOCUS: Unconditional Hospitality

“Sassenachs No More “

Sunday, October 13, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Leviticus 19:34

Ephesians 2:11-22

In Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* novels, Claire Randall is an English army nurse just back from the trenches of World War I. Claire and her husband, a history professor, travel to Scotland to research his family's ancestry. The couple visit a circle of standing stones (like Stonehenge), an ancient pagan worship space. When Claire touches the center stone, she is transported back in time to the eighteenth century. Alone and disoriented, Claire stumbles into a traveling band of Scottish warriors from the highland clan Makenzie.

Betrayed by her English accent, Claire is regarded with disdain by the Scots who resent the English occupation of Scotland. Disliking anything and anyone English, the Scots call Claire “*Sassenach*,” which is not a term of endearment. A *Sassenach* is an outlander (from whence the novel gets its name), a non-native, an unwelcome intruder, a trespasser on Scottish soil. Claire uses her knowledge of the future and of the healing arts to endear herself to the Makenzies, but she is continually referred to as the “*Sassenach*.” Claire will never truly be at home among the Scots; she will always be the outsider, the English trespasser, forever the *Sassenach*.

**We were *Sassenachs* once.** Which brings me to our text from Ephesians. The apostle Paul, writing to the congregation at Ephesus, reminds his readers that they were once *Sassenachs* before God. As Gentiles, they were foreigners excluded from citizenship in Israel and from God's covenant promises to the Jews. Their sins separated them from God and left them “*without hope and without God in the world.*” But now, says Paul, through the “*blood of Christ*,” those who were once far away have been brought back to God. They are, says Paul, “*no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of [God's] household.*” (2:19). No longer *Sassenachs*, they are one with God, brought near by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

You and I were once *Sassenachs*, too; but through the crucifixion of Jesus for the remission of our sins and by the mercy of his resurrection we become the heirs of eternal life with God. Salvation is ours because God extended God's grace to *Sassenachs* like us. Jesus Christ, who is our peace, breaks down the barriers that destroy and tears down the walls

of hostility that divide us from God and from each other. Christ's enduring purpose, says Paul, is to “*create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace*” (v. 15). This new humanity, reconciled to God through Christ, is freed from the captivity of sin and free to live as the true children of God. We are no longer *Sassenachs* for Christ makes us all one in him.

Today, as we consider what Unconditional Hospitality means for us and for our congregation, I remind you that none of us would be welcome here without God's grace. When we were *Sassenachs*, separated from God by our sins and unable to find our way back, God in God's infinite and inexplicable grace chose to find us and bring us back through the blood of Christ. What's more, God does not simply bring us back, God gives us God's Spirit so that we can continue to live and grow and become God's “*holy temple*” (v. 21), a people who seek God's purpose in and for the world.

We all know what it feels like to be excluded. Each one of us knows what it feels like to be a *Sassenach*, an outsider. It's not a good feeling. God reminds the Israelites that “*the foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God*” (Leviticus 19:34). As those who know the pain of being excluded, we are called to ensure that all are welcome in God's house and afforded equal access to God's promises. We have no rightful claim on God's promises, except for the grace of God; and so, we are called to extend that same grace to others in recognition of our being brought near to God by the blood of Christ and the in-working of God's Spirit.

**Treat others as they wish to be treated.** How do we go about extending such grace? Well, the “Golden Rule” is a good start. You know how it goes: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31). The Golden Rule urges us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes when considering how to will interact with them. The Golden Rule is a good place to start, but it's focus is still inward, still on us and how we want to be treated.

I want to expand the Golden Rule a bit by proposing that we treat others as they wish to be treated! I'm calling this the Platinum Rule. The only way we will know how to treat someone as they wish to be treated is by asking them. This means we must have a conversation with them, build a relationship with them, and find out what respect means

to them. Treating someone as they wish to be treated is outward-looking, outward-moving, outward-thinking. The Platinum Rule puts the other person's feelings first.

When the Israelites found themselves in exile in Babylon, God gave them the Platinum Rule. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God said: *"seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper"* (Jeremiah 29:7). Israel was to work for the peace and prosperity of her new neighbors. As Israel sought the peace and prosperity of her former enemies, putting their welfare before her own, Israel would be blessed.

I imagine this was a difficult lesson for Israel. Babylon conquered Israel and carried many Jews away to a foreign land. I expect God's people felt bitter and angry. I presume they wished ill of their captors. But God calls them to treat the Babylonians as they wished to be treated. God asked Israel to think outside themselves and to put Babylon's needs first. Jesus would later say something similar: *"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:44-45).

Loving our enemies is hard work. Finding common ground with others is a difficult task. Putting another's needs before our own is often the last thing we want to do. But this is exactly what God did for us. When we were God's enemies, Jesus loved us. When we stood far from God through sin, Jesus brought us back. When we selfishly put our needs before God, Jesus set his divinity aside and died to redeem us. For this, God exalted him and set him as the example of gracious hospitality for us all. By treating us as we wished to be treated, Jesus brought us God's eternal blessing.

**Hospitality brings unexpected blessings.** Anytime we offer unconditional hospitality we can expect to receive a blessing. Just as Israel would receive blessing if she sought the peace and prosperity of her neighbors, so will we be blessed when we offer gracious hospitality as God showed it to us in Jesus.

In Genesis 18, Abraham is camped by the oaks of Mamre. Scripture says that the LORD appeared to Abraham as three travelers. When Abraham saw the men, he rushed to greet them. Abraham offered them water to wash the dust from their feet, and he ordered that food and drink be provided. Sarah baked flour cakes and Abraham chose a calf *"tender and good"* to serve his guests (18:7). Such gracious hospitality was the custom.

Abraham didn't know these men, but he welcomed them, holding nothing back. In the harsh desert climate, extending hospitality meant saving a life, showed respect for the traveler, and built friendship and trust. Abraham is rewarded for his unconditional hospitality. The men promise that Abraham and his wife, Sarah, will be blessed with a son. That son, Isaac, is the father of Jacob (Israel), whose twelve sons become the patriarchs of Israel's tribes. For his hospitality, Abraham is blessed beyond measure.

The writer of Hebrews, referencing this story, sums it up for us this way: *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it"* (Hebrews 13:2). Jesus tells us that when we show hospitality to strangers, we are showing it to Jesus himself (Matthew 10:40; 25:40-45). When such unconditional hospitality is offered, there is blessing enough for all. An enemy becomes a friend. A need is met. A bond is strengthened. Love is shared.

As we focus on our discipleship, we intend to offer unconditional hospitality throughout this community. You can show Federated Church's unconditional hospitality by:

- Welcoming everyone into our worship and fellowship;
- Encouraging your neighbors to become members of our faith family;
- Inviting inactive members to re-engage with us;
- Turning up at workdays to make our church a welcoming place;
- Attending fellowship events which strengthen our community.

Hospitality is not just an ideal; it is a key feature of God's Kingdom. There are no *Sassenachs* in God's kingdom. We can move that Kingdom goal one step closer by offering unconditional hospitality to everyone. We can live the love that Christ modeled for us. We can treat others as they wish to be treated. We can seek the peace and prosperity of our community, and we will be blessed by the encounter.

Prayer: Grace-giving God, give us eyes to see the deepest needs of people. Give us hearts full of love for our neighbors as well as for the strangers we meet. May we remember to listen, to smile, to offer a helping hand each time the opportunity presents itself. Give us hearts of courage that we will be brave enough to risk loving our enemy. Inspire us to go out of our way to include those in the margins. Help us to be welcoming and inclusive to all who come to our door. Let us be God's hospitality in the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.