

Palisades Presbyterian Church
June 15, 2008

At the tip of our fingers...
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“All existential relationships depend on accepting the other he or she is...”
so says Martin Buber in Encounter on the Narrow Ridge.

You know, that’s not always so easy to do. In my own case, I think I do this naturally, just sort of accept others as they are – but what I realize is that my first reaction, especially in a situation where I am a little too vested (another way, perhaps, of saying egocentric) – my first reaction is more bluster than balanced. I am sometimes so wired to be critical, defensive, and protective that I do it without thinking of its affect on others. Sometimes I realize it after the fact, other times I need the generosity of others to tell me when I have been unfair or unkind...or just a jerk.

Twisting Buber around a bit, when that happens and I have the opportunity to hear my wrongs and to admit them; I am able to move back to the other, that being the more humbled, right-sized self. I am able to accept who I am when I am wrong and get the adjustments that I need to be one among many seeking to be faithful instead of one directing many in what I think is best for them!

Abraham has this right in this early writing of Genesis. Look at the way that he runs to welcome strangers. No mention of defense, scoping them out, even caution. Before he knows that these are Divine Beings, he has Sarah making bread, the servant preparing a calf, drinks being poured. Think of this happening today. Think of turning around and seeing three strangers come toward you in the vestibule of your home... I can feel the initial rush of adrenalin pumping already to protect myself.

How did we get to such a different place? It would be very natural to wail a bit and sign and say, “See how different we are; how we treat strangers today. Shame on us.? And, some of that would perhaps be true.

But you know what I think...I think it was different in both regards.

- If Abraham were able to look forward in the same way we look backward
- were he able to see how we take care of the strangers among us in our modern setting...

- he would probably see some good things, too.
- and I bet he would recognize some of his own shortcomings, as well.

It would seem that Buber's statement about existential relationships would also require to some degree, at least, the acceptance of the "time" of the other – at least as a starting place. A place from which to look to each other's self, communities, and time to transcend the differences by accepting the others.

There are many ways to look at Abraham and Sarah's story and this encounter of the strangers. This is very much a model for much early stories about greeting the stranger, the requirement of hospitality for survival in the ways of the desert. Hebron, from where we believe the story emerges, was an old Canaanite city before it became one of the ancient cities in the Kingdom of Judah. Today it is a city at the center of the West Bank and home to some 200,000 Palestinians. It has transcended much of its own as a place of many seekers.

I love that the name "Hebron" traces back to the same root as *Haver*, or "friend". In Arabic, "Ibrahim al-Khalil" ("إبراهيم الخليل") means "Ibrahim the friend", signifying that, according to Islamic teaching, Allah (God) chose Ibrahim (i.e. Abraham) as his friend.¹

I also love Abraham and Sarah for being at the vertex of God and humanity, before the tribe moved to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. That, I would love to take back, somehow.

And of course there is the laughter.

You have to love the way Sarah quietly said to herself, "Sure, me a baby at my age! You got to be kidding. Who do you think you are?" And as if to say, "Who do you think it might be if I am able to read your thoughts?" God says, "You laughed!"

Sarah, immediately defensive says, "No, I didn't!"

God, "Oh, yes you did!"

I take God's admonition in a much lighter way. It was the kind of laughter that was all around here yesterday. Between the work, the weather, and the huge and wonderful task of welcoming our friends and families here, many of them strangers, we conversed, and worked, and ate, and laughed. And when nothing we had to say seemed to jolt us into laughter, all we had to do was to look at the kids and Chance playing in the pouring rain. C'mon, be honest, how many of you wanted to go out there and get bare foot and muddied!

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebron>

We were Haver, Hebron, Ibrahim, Sarah – friend. That’s who we are – just like Abraham and Sarah were.

Among the many conversations I had yesterday, one was with Bill Salm. Bill is a retired Executive Presbyterian, Seminary professor, and the husband of Laurie Ferguson, the much-beloved former minister of this church.

We were talking about the world, you know, the one that makes us a bit crazy at times? We talked about the national church and some of the quirks or worse of the institution that were so difficult to understand. We both agreed that the place where the cynicism and frustration are ameliorated to a large degree was when we found ourselves in the ministry and work of parish life. The problems didn’t go away, not were they forgotten, but the priorities shifted from out there – to those coming in here, from out there.

During the festival yesterday, a gentleman some of you may know, Frank Sinclair, came to see me. He was joined by a family friend of many years, named Mary Arendt. Frank’s wife of nearly 50 years, Beatrice, had passed away a few weeks ago and they were hoping to have the memorial service here.

It was very sweet to listen to Frank talk about his Presbyterian roots and how he hoped that even though he wasn’t a member that they could have the service here. I looked at him, and I was very touched and moved – and I started to speak without knowing what the words were going to be.

I said something like, this is not our space, Frank...this is given to us to be good stewards for those on their way, their path, their journey with God along the way. You are welcome here and we will do everything we can to help you celebrate and honor Beatrice and the life you have shared.

I thought we were both going to start weeping.

We do welcome strangers, don’t we? The world does feel distant and yet absolutely right when we enter into Hebron together – at least as a respite for the work ahead.

We are the disciples of God as Jesus was of God. We are all of God, as was Abraham and all who preceded and followed.

And then we have Matthew. We were doing ok with all the welcoming and hospitality until Matthew has Jesus sending out the disciples – except to the Gentiles!

Well, we have to transcend back to the day a bit...

- Matthew as establishing Jesus as the Messiah

- The growing separation and distinction between Jews and Jews who followed Jesus
- The “path of the Gentiles” forbidden during times of pagan rituals
- And many other reasons

Matthew had a purpose and he is the only evangelist...

The SyroPhoenecian woman

Even Matthew had to acknowledge what Jesus had to acknowledge...

And so we “transit” in our transcendence from time to time, place to place, physical to spiritual – across each one and through and beyond in ways we can’t know...

But the key to it all is at our fingertips – the ones that dial the phone, pen the letter, extend our touch to one another – accepting the other whether stranger and friend. And when we do, two things are sure to happen –

The world will seem to be somehow righted again...

And surely, in the midst of it all – there will be strawberries, laughter, and love.

Amen.