

Faith Mennonite Church  
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### **Hospitality: The gift and the challenge**

*Genesis 18:1-10; Matthew 15:21-28*

Last May, soon after the governor of Arizona signed into law the controversial SB 1070, permitting any law enforcement official to check on a person's immigration status if they are stopped for another infraction, I heard an interview<sup>1</sup> with two people who live near the Arizona/Mexico border. They couldn't have been more different.

Larry Vance, a rancher, told horror stories of groups of migrants pillaging property and leaving trash in their wake. He lives with several guns in his house to protect himself and his family. He once shot and injured an intruder. Although he hasn't joined any of the militia groups in the area, he wishes for tighter law and border enforcement, particularly to keep out those who are involved in drug or gang activity. He tells stories of vandalism, break-ins and theft.

Byrd Baylor, a retired writer also lives in a remote part of the desert not far from the border. Although she lives alone she owns no guns. Instead she maintains a supply of food and water on her front porch with a sign that says "comida y agua para migrantes" (food & water for migrants). Inside her adobe home, which she never locks, she keeps a small devotional table with candles. She sometimes returns to find candles lit and notes of thanks or small items left as gifts, but nothing has ever been taken from her house. (I believe she is the same woman who is featured in the DVD that Dick Westby has been circulating.)

Larry Vance experiences those who cross his land as *hostis*, the enemy. Byrd Baylor experiences her visitors as *hospes*, strangers in need of hospitality. This is a simplification of the story. Mr. Vance acknowledges that in an earlier time his father (a Mexican immigrant) provided food and water to migrants who were primarily field workers. But as the political and economic situation in Mexico has deteriorated and the drug cartels have gained power, many of the persons who cross his land are prone to violence or disrespectful activity such as cutting fences or leaving trash behind. Mr. Vance is caught in a situation created by a complex web of international trade agreements and drug and weapon trafficking, with powerful players and forces on each side of the border.

It wasn't clear from the story whether the distinct locations of Mr. Vance's and Ms. Baylor's properties determined the types of people who pass through. And we know that Ms. Baylor's hospitality is not a guarantee of protection. Their stories remind us that when we speak of and practice hospitality we will encounter gifts and challenges.

Our scripture texts this morning are no different. The Genesis story of Abram offering hospitality to the strangers who visited him is a story of easy hospitality that brings a surprising gift. The Matthew story, of Jesus' encounter with a foreign woman, is more complex. There is a gift in this story as well, but it comes with a perplexing struggle.

Much like Byrd Baylor, Abram practiced hospitality in the midst of a conflictive environment. Remember that Abram was still a migrant, having traveled to land already inhabited by other peoples. In the chapters preceding our story today, Abram's nephew Lot was captured and held hostage by powerful, unfriendly neighbors. Abram fought to release him. Yet Abram didn't shut out the strangers, and when three men appeared, he responded in trust that their visit was purposeful. He offered hospitality.

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Gordon, host of the American Public Media program, *The Story*, "Fed up at the border," May 20, 2010.

And *what* hospitality! He didn't just offer some cold water or a cup of tea. He butchered and prepared a feast. Although Abraham had become a monotheist, following and believing in One God—a novel idea at the time—for all he knew these visitors were polytheists. Yet he welcomed them and treated them as messengers of his God. And messengers they were. They brought word that Sarah would have a child within the coming year.

Abraham's hospitality has served as a model down through the ages. The writer of Hebrews (13:2), recalling Abraham's example, wrote: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." The Greek practice of *philoxenia* – hospitality to strangers – that I spoke of with the children is also a reflection of this tradition.

It's puzzling, then, to read Matthew's account of Jesus resisting a stranger, the Canaanite woman from Tyre who comes and begs for him to heal her sick daughter. Matthew may have included this story as a reminder to his mostly Jewish audience that Jesus was both Jewish and fully human. Certainly there was a social context behind this passage that no doubt affected the way Jesus and his disciples reacted to this woman. Political tensions ran high between Tyre and Galilee because of their socioeconomic relationship. Much of the agricultural produce from Jewish Galilee was exported to Tyre, even as many poor Galileans were hungry. "When Jesus speaks, therefore, about the unfairness of taking bread out of the mouths of the children (Jews) and giving it to the dogs (Gentiles), his statement may partly reflect the socio-economic tension between the two communities."<sup>2</sup>

While Jesus' and his disciples' response to the woman was far from the Abrahamic model of hospitality, and almost reminds us of Larry Vance, the story has an ironic twist. It has echoes of John's account of Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman. In both of these stories Jesus challenges, he argues, but in doing so he offers these women the opportunity to raise their voice and to argue with him. One New Testament commentator has noted that this foreign woman is the only person in the gospels who wins an argument with Jesus! We usually think of encounters with Jesus as being transformative for those who sought him out. In this story, the exchange is mutually transformative. Jesus receives a gift of new understanding from this woman and the woman receives the healing for her daughter that she so deeply longed for.

Both of these stories—of Abraham and Jesus—offer encouragement and guidance as we walk through the complex and perplexing issues of the current immigration situation in our country. The Abraham story reminds us that strangers come bearing gifts. No doubt many of the folks who are called "illegals" and "aliens" in the current climate have, on occasion, been ministering angels. Certainly they have bolstered our economy and done grueling manual labor in our food system that many would not do. Matthew's story of Jesus' encounter with the woman from Tyre reminds us that fearing or disregarding the stranger, the other, is a very human response. But when we engage, even with hesitance, we may be surprised by the new understanding we gain.

Neither of these forms of hospitality come easily for us today, as individuals, families, communities, and even for our denomination. Next Sunday in our final adult education forum on immigration we will discuss how difficult the decision has been around whether or not to hold the 2013 Mennonite national convention in Arizona. That discussion has been deeply painful. Voices from Latino Mennonite Churches express exasperation with imbalances of power within the decision-making structures of the denomination. Some feel like dogs left to catch the crumbs, rather than brothers and sisters at the table.

But Abraham and Jesus invite us to continue following and practicing hospitality. May Jesus say to us as he said to the woman from Tyre: "Great is your faith!"

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Marcus, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, p. 462