

God's Work Begins at the Kitchen Table
Genesis 18:1-14

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Grab the pencil in your pew, use your service folder, and in thirty seconds write down as many examples of doing God's work as you can think of. So if you think of playing the organ as doing God's work, you would write that down, see how it works? OK go. Alright, pencils down. So, raise your hand if on your list you had "serve as a pastor or teacher." Raise your hand if you had, "serve on a church board or committee". Raise your hand if you said, "clean the church", "set up communion", "mow the church lawn", "sing in the choir", "play an instrument in church". How many listed "stop to give someone directions"? How many had "invite a neighbor to dinner"? How about "talk to a neighbor on their porch"? Not many. I'm going to insist that those last three (directions, inviting to dinner, talking on the porch) are as much doing God's work as all the others. Why? Jesus leaves us here in this world to share his promises – agree? OK what do you need if you are going to share what God has done and said? An audience. If someone is going to give you permission to talk, it's probably because you have built a relationship with them. And relationships that aren't blood start with hospitality – with just taking the time to care, to listen. You could rightly say God's work starts at the kitchen table. In fact, we see countless examples of that in the Bible. Today we'll take a close look at one of those examples. It's an account you may have heard before, but even if you have, I'm guessing that you looked at it from a different angle. It's the account of Abraham and his wife Sarah as they encounter three travelers near their tent.

Genesis 18:1-14 The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³ He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." ⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread." ⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. ⁹ "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. ¹⁰ Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" ¹³ Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

So let's set the stage. Abraham lived around 2000 years before Jesus was born – that's before Moses, that's before there is an Israel. He is one of the first people to whom God gives a direct promise – his promised messiah will come from his descendants. Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish people. Prior to this encounter, God has called Abraham to move to the land that would eventually be Israel, and he had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. Abraham moves with all his possessions and in his new home became a very wealthy nomadic herdsman. Most of the time when we read this section, God's promise that Sarah would have a son is the main focus, and that is not a bad thing, because quite honestly that is the most important piece of information that we glean from these verses. The promised miracle of Sarah having a child well past the age of childbirth, and God's follow through with the birth of Isaac, is a prominent piece of how God sent his son Jesus into the world to do his saving work. But that is not the only thing that we can learn from these verses. Today I want to zero in on what Abraham and Sarah did when Abraham met these three.

So remember this is before hotels and gas stations and air travel. Abraham is a nomadic herder, moving his tent and his flocks from place to place. Encounters with others who were not herdsmen were probably rare. Notice what Abraham does when he sees these three. He hurries out to them. He bows down. He says "**If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.**" What can we learn? Well consider what he doesn't do. He doesn't spy them out to be sure they aren't enemies. He isn't wary and suspicious. He doesn't ignore them and let them fend for themselves. He doesn't delegate the work of greeting them or helping them to one of his servants or his herdsmen. He assumes the best, that they are tired and hungry from a long journey. He doesn't just help them, he is eager to do it, he hurries out to them. He doesn't do the minimum and give them a little water and send them off. He insists that they have a drink and eat – not by themselves, not with his crew, but with him. And he does all this with humility, calling himself their servant. He

doesn't make them to feel that they are imposing on him. He does everything he can to make them feel welcome. And how about Sarah? When Abraham beckons her to help him carry out this hospitality, she doesn't complain. She doesn't resist. She doesn't say, "I just finished preparing the last meal." She is of one mind with Abraham, working with him to go above and beyond to be kind to these strangers. She got a major meal put together and she and Abraham feed them.

Now as it turns out, these men are God himself and angels. We learn that from the book of Hebrews chapter 13, but Abraham and Sarah didn't know it right away. That isn't what prompted their actions, this was sincere hospitality. An action which the Bible praises over and over again. I Peter 4 tells us: **9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.** **10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.** Romans 12 tells us: **13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.** Why is hospitality so important? It's so often the starting point of trust and relationships. And building that trust is so critical when it comes to doing God's work. And that's true now more than ever. About a month ago, at the WELS northern Wisconsin district convention I attended, there was a presentation on doing God's work in a post-Christian culture. If you want more info on what post-Christian means, take a look at the *Forum Focus* in your church slot this week. Among the things he shared is that the majority of people in our culture are not looking for a church. In other words, it's not a matter of us getting the word out to them that we as a church are here. It's not a matter of providing more innovative and unique programming that is different from other churches. They aren't looking for a church! Even if they participate in our programs (VBS, Sunday school, preschool, school, sports clubs), they are very comfortable with what we might call a "transactional" relationship with church. "I'll take part in this particular program because it has value for me, but beyond that I'm not really interested." Trust of clergy is right up there – I should say right down there with politicians. And many look at church as an institution that is looking to get something valuable from them rather than an institution that wants to give something of value to them. So where do you start with a post-Christian culture? Not with marketing, not with program ministry. Do you know where you start? At the kitchen table. Why are we here? It's because we value people, right? Because we care about them and want them in heaven right. We cannot afford to wait to show them that we care until they show up at worship. It starts by showing hospitality where they are – on their porch, in your kitchen, at work.

Do we see it? Or is it maybe true that our lack of hospitality, our not really caring about the people right around us is a sin that escapes our awareness? It's so easy to be angry at the neighbor – he mowed two feet onto my property after all. So easy to write off the co-worker, she's for abortion. So easy to never even start the conversation with a neighbor, life is so busy after all, and I can't even find time to meet up with my friends. Ah, but those right around us are those God has placed us closest to. And he doesn't charge us with bringing them to faith. No, he just wants us to care about them, to look for opportunities, and when they present themselves to use them.

You know just this past week a member of Faith called me on the phone with a story about how just showing hospitality and reaching out led to an acquaintance coming to a place where God's message will be shared. This was after years of being in a casual acquaintance. He was so amazed, he said, "I had to call to share this with you!" It was while I was writing this very sermon, I kid you not! Sometimes it's after years of building those relationships that God brings the opportunity. The death of a loved one, retirement, birth of a child. But we won't know it if we don't know them. And by the way, that's not just true for the lost. It's true for our brothers and sisters here at church too. You know we are blessed to bring in close to 100 new members each year, but we lose just as many. Some through death, some through transfer, but last year more than half just don't respond to contact anymore. I wonder, is it sometimes or maybe even most of the time because they never felt that people cared about them as a person? Oh, they got a hello, they came to a new member dinner, but no one ever took the conversation to the next level. Could we maybe prevent at least some of those losses just by taking an interest, showing hospitality? It's not hard; it just takes time and effort. But boy is it rewarding. Just ask the gentleman who called me. Just ask the pastor who shared his excitement. Just ask the one who finally felt like someone really cared. So, who are your neighbors? Can you name the five families who live closest to you? Who is that family whose picture is on the new member board, that new kid in your class? Did you take the time to go and talk to them? Would you consider inviting them over for dinner? That's as much God's work as preaching a sermon, teaching a class, or serving on a board! It really is. Just try it and watch what God does with it! And when God blesses it, and through his opportunity and in his time, you are able to share God's promises and it changes them, and maybe you even see them sitting at church next to you – I can't tell you what an amazing feeling that is! And it all starts at the kitchen table. It's God's work. Really it is! AMEN.