

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” – Hebrews 13:2

A Sermon for Saint John the Baptist’s Episcopal Church, Minneapolis

by The Rev. Craig Lemming, *Transitional Deacon*

Sunday, June 18, 2017 – Father’s Day

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Toni Morrison’s novels *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* teach us about the power of names. Pointing beyond themselves names carry within them family stories, even sagas! Names memorialize significant moments in history or cherish the legacy of a beloved ancestor. Names symbolize the hopes and dreams of the family who welcome a child in to their midst as a precious gift and sacred mystery. The story of my name begins before I was born. My parents decided that my mother would have the honor of naming their first son, my older brother. Thanks to her love for the beauty, aesthetics, arts and culture of Spain, Mum chose to name my older brother, Miguel – Spanish for Michael the Archangel.¹ My father had the honor of naming their second son. Why did Dad choose to name me “Craig”? My name carries with it the story of my family’s utter obsession with Soccer. As my mother struggled in labor with me in Harare, the celebrated midfielder Craig Johnston² scored the winning goal for Liverpool Football Club in England on the day I was

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_\(archangel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_(archangel))

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig_Johnston

born. The irony of the story of these names, is that my brother Miguel would go on to become a professional soccer player in his twenties; and I, Craig, would go on to pursue the stuff of Archangels: music, poetry, and divinity.

In today's Gospel, the names of the apostles of Jesus are recorded: **“These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot” (Matthew 10:2-4).**

These names from first century Palestine are still used and heard in our own world today. Names chosen in ancient times by parents completely unaware that those very names they chose would become inextricably bound up with the life, legacy, and proclamation of the crucified and resurrected Christ for ages to come.

This morning we heard the story behind the name Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah. The name Isaac is derived from the root of the word “to laugh,” memorializing that moment when Sarah laughed to herself at the incredible and impossible promise that she would conceive and give birth to a son in her and Abraham's old age. Sarah's laughter would be enshrined in the name Isaac for ages to come. A name that points beyond itself and proclaims a truth well-known

and cherished by Womanist theologians: the truth that God alone has the power to transform “never” into “nevertheless.” The truth that God alone makes a way out of “no way.”

Today is Father’s Day. Happy Father’s Day to all who are celebrating! As I underscored in my sermon on Mother’s Day, I want us to recognize that while there are excellent theological arguments for imagining God as Father, we must be sure that we also acknowledge that there are fathers who are neglectful, abusive, or absent, and that there are children being raised by one or two mothers, so the idea of Fatherhood and the image of God as Father or as Mother, becomes theologically problematic.³ Instead, I would like to focus on Abraham, whose very name, “Abraham” means “Father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5); and who is indeed the Father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Today’s Old Testament lesson teaches us about Abraham’s extravagant hospitality and generosity toward strangers. Hospitality that not only reveals the presence of God in strangers, but also discloses the promise of God that transforms “never” into “nevertheless.” Abraham runs to meet the strangers and bows down to the ground to greet them. With the words of his mouth

³ <http://stjohns-mpls.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/5.14.17cl.pdf>

Abraham makes the humble offering of a little water for them to drink and to wash the strangers' feet; a moment to rest in the shade of his oak trees; and a little bread for their refreshment. What Abraham hastens to actually give them in deed is a magnificent feast: cakes of choice flour rather than mere bread, curds and milk rather than water, and a roasted calf, tender and good.⁴ Abraham's radical hospitality welcomes God the Stranger into his household and unbeknown to Abraham he also welcomes the grace and wonder of God's promise into his life. The "never" of Abraham and Sarah's childlessness is transformed into the "nevertheless" of their son Isaac and multitudes of progeny for ages to come.

Lately, I have been pondering what fatherhood means. I have been reflecting on my relationship with my own father and all the times that God transformed "never" into "nevertheless" in his life. I have been rejoicing that my brother is now a father himself and I have been marveling at all the times God has transformed "never" into "nevertheless" in his life, too. And while I do not expect to be addressed as "Father" myself, as I prepare to be ordained as a Priest, I am ready to embrace the gift and promise of God's call to love and serve young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor; to preach and declare God's forgiveness and

⁴ Genesis 18:6-8.

to pronounce God's blessing; to minister the Word of God and God's Holy Sacraments, and to nourish all people with the riches of God's grace.⁵ I want to remind each of you that **"You are a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9)**. Each of us is called to do Priestly work in the world. We are all "Fathers" like Abraham, called to run out, to greet, and to reverence the stranger; to hasten to prepare a lavish feast for the living God who resides in the presence of every person we meet.

Relating this passage with today's Gospel, I see two points of connection. First, we hear that, **"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36)**. As the Body of Christ, we are each called to be Shepherds, "Pastors," or "Fathers" to those who are being harassed and helpless. Christ's compassion for those who are suffering lives on in each of us when we stand in solidarity with those who are being harassed and those who are helpless. Christ's presence manifests in us when we provide Abraham and Sarah's hospitality to those who are suffering. In us Christ's presence with those who suffer affirms the truth we heard in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, that **"suffering produces**

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 531.

endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us” (Romans 5:3-5).

The other connection between Abraham and Sarah and today’s Gospel is Jesus’ reminder that the promise of God’s healing grace has already been freely given to each of us: **“You received without payment; give without payment” (Matthew 10:8).** Abraham’s radical welcome and extravagant hospitality were offered with unfettered generosity to the Stranger, and the Stranger’s Promise blesses Abraham and Sarah and their descendants forever. Abraham gave extravagantly without payment and received God’s extravagant blessing without payment. Let us go forth into the world to honor Abraham’s legacy by loving the Stranger who blesses us with their very presence. We have received God’s grace freely without payment; let us share God’s grace freely without payment. When we do that, suddenly the incredible promise of God is made real, and like Sarah, even our incredulous laughter will confirm the reality that God alone transforms “never” into “nevertheless” and makes a way out of “no way.” When we live out Our Fatherly calling, we become each other’s daily bread, so that everyone is provided for, and everyone has enough. When we live out Our Fatherly calling, we forgive each other as we have been forgiven by God and then we are restored to right relationship in the image of the Triune God. As each of us

lives out Our Fatherly calling, God's will shall indeed be done on earth as it is in heaven, for God's kingdom has indeed come near. **"As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 10:7)** in the Stranger. Amen.