

“An Open Tent Policy”

A Sermon for Transylvania

Rev. Gary E. Smith

September 26, 2010

Unitarian Church of Székelykeresztúr, Transylvania, Romania

Sermon:

Let's begin with the story, the story Réka and Craig read, the story from the Hebrew Bible, from the Book of Genesis, the story of God meeting Abraham, God in the person of three strangers who appear out of nowhere, this story that follows the story of the origin of the covenant between God and Abraham, making Abraham the father of nations – I will be your God and you will be my people - this story that comes right before some really bad stuff – we stopped at verse 8 – Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Lot's wife, pillar of salt, the whole thing.

I'm not going there. Let's stay at the tent. What happens here is remarkable. This story of Abraham's tent is the first story of hospitality in the Torah; the first account of one person bringing another into their home, not just any person, but a stranger, not just one stranger but three, not waiting for them to draw near, but running out to meet them, throwing open the tent, bringing water, rest, veal even, not even eating with them but waiting on them. It's all here.

In the midst of the grandeur of Genesis, the Creation, Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, the apple, the serpent, Cain and Abel, men and women living eight and nine hundred years, Noah, the ark, two by two, the flood, the dove, the tower of Babel, epoch battles between tribes, then Abram, Sarai, Hagar, God appearing out of nowhere and everywhere - what is this? - a simple tent, strangers, water, meat, rest, human kindness, hospitality.

Hospitality, host, hospice, hospital, hotel, all from the same root word, from the Latin, from the French, relating to what it means to receive a guest. Here is Abraham receiving three guests, three strangers, and he takes them in, he runs to meet them, and he says, “do not pass by without a visit. You would be doing ME a favor.”

“Hospitality,” Gail Godwin writes, “derives from the Latin ‘hospes’, which not only means guest, visitor, or stranger, but also host... a concept of human exchange, so the same word could serve whether you were on the giving or receiving end. In the early Middle Ages, a hospice, or hospital, was a place where pilgrims and travelers were received and entertained; only later was the word narrowed down to mean an institution for the care of the sick or the wounded.”

A word with win/win built into it: hospitality – “a concept of human exchange, the same word could serve whether you were on the giving or receiving end,” Gail Godwin writes, and we have all been on both ends of hospitality, the giving and receiving, is it a circle, is it a spiral, how can we tell where one begins and the other ends?

“An Open Tent Policy” A Sermon for Transylvania

Rabbi Niles Goldstein writes in the “My Turn” column of NEWSWEEK six years ago of a trip he took on horseback through northwest Mongolia, “a remote region of herdsmen and nomads,” he says. “Within the first several days of my journey, after traversing the habitat of ibex, wolves and endangered snow leopards, I came across a celebration. A young man was about to be married, and relatives and neighbors had gathered to build him a ger, a circular, transportable, tent-like structure as a present.

“When I arrived,” he says, “the ger was half finished; its wooden frame stood bare... the men using hammers, saws and sinews to build and affix the frame, while the women scraped the felt covering that would shelter the young couple from the weather. I tried my best to do my part, which consisted of schmoozing, through a translator, with the groom’s father and uncles, and taking photos of the children.”

And now remember Abraham meeting the three strangers; remember what Abraham did, as we listen to Goldstein finish his story, “Since I had to leave the event to move on with my own trip, my experiences concluded with a mid afternoon feast of candy and homemade cheese curds, followed by celebratory toasts of vodka and fermented mare’s milk.” And I am thinking as I read this: they have stopped and moved up part of the celebration so their guest can join in. Here’s what the rabbi writes, “Never before had I felt so welcomed, even as a total stranger, into someone else’s world; their party had become my party.”

What does having a partner congregation mean? What does it mean to be in relation to people in Szekeleykeresztur in northern Romania in the Carpathian Mountains in an area called Transylvania? What does it mean to visit there, to leave the main road and to drive through some narrow streets of other villages and to come to a T in the road and to turn right and there is the school, there is the parsonage, there is the church, there is the community house, there is the gate, there is the courtyard, there are the grape vines, there is the garden, there are the chickens, there is the minister Jozsef and his wife Anna, there are all the people. They have flowers. They have been waiting a long time for us. They are smiling. They are crying. We are smiling. We are crying. And we scramble off the bus into their arms. Who is giving and who is receiving? Throw away the Hungarian/English dictionaries. Something universal is happening.

The rabbi would say the people of Szekeleykeresztur have an “open tent” policy. That’s what he said about Abraham and Sarah. The nomadic culture of Mongolia, he says, “inculcates a culture of interdependence and washes away the illusion of self-reliance that so many of us Americans have bought into; more now, arguably, than ever before. It shows us the lunacy of trying to go it alone, and the truth that we don’t have to.

“An Open Tent Policy” A Sermon for Transylvania

“Ours is a culture of excessive individualism,” Goldstein says, “of the radical pursuit of our own needs and desires, and, on the global level, of unilateralism. So what is it we need to atone for? Not for having packed up our tents and moved into town houses; not for having traded in our camels for cars. But for having, in the process, abandoned our commitment to community.”

But I’m getting ahead of myself. There’s more to it. What happens after we get off the bus? What happens after the hugging, the crying, the laughing, the smiling, the dance where you hold someone close and then push them away so that you can just look at them, look around, and say, “oh my God, we’re here!” What happens next? Come in! Drink! Eat!! Plum brandy! Homemade sweet wine! Chimney cakes! Cabbage rolls! Bread! Did I say plum brandy? Polenka! Chicken! Pig! Cheese! Eat more! No empty glasses!

When Eliz and I went there for Zsuzsanna’s wedding, Zsuzsanna, our daughter for a year, daughter for a lifetime, when we went for her wedding and we arrived for the reception, could it have been about eight o’clock in the evening, still light on that late June day, the first course of dinner arrived then and the seventh course arrived as the sun came up the next day. Cabbage rolls at four in the morning! Julia was there. She can tell you. I remember Julia dancing so beautifully with her proud father.

Open tent policy! Could I let September go by and not mention Frederick Buechner? “To eat any meal together,” he says, “is to meet at the level of our most basic need. It is hard to preserve your dignity with butter on your chin or to keep your distance when asking for the tomato ketchup. To eat (a) meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic humanness, which involves our need not just for food but for each other. I need you to fill my emptiness,” he says, “just as you need me to help fill yours. As for the emptiness that’s still left over; well, we’re in it together, or it in us. Maybe it’s most of what makes us human and makes us brothers (and sisters.)”

Drop in here at First Parish on a Thursday afternoon and watch the preparations for Open Table, the food pantry, the meal. Watch the volunteers and guests set up tables and chairs. See the food carried in from cars, the produce, the bread, the donations. Soak up the atmosphere in the kitchen as the cooks prepare a wonderful and delicious hot meal. Ask any of them who is giving and who is receiving and they will not understand the question.

Within the first weeks of moving in to our new home in Belmont, new next-door neighbors (moving in after us!) invite us for Sunday lunch with their friends. Brian, Bernice and Samantha, their three year old, born within days of our own granddaughter living upstairs, we sit at their table as strangers, and ate roasted vegetables, smoked salmon, hamburgers, pasta salad, green salad, the food keeps coming, Bernice’s mother never eating, pushing food, pouring lemonade, we leave before dessert, there is a knock at our own door hours later, two servings of fruit tart, out of this world delicious. Bernice, my new best friend, bringing to our door hot bread, brioche, cream puffs, oh my.

“An Open Tent Policy” A Sermon for Transylvania

Rev. Gary E. Smith - October 2010

Unitarian Church of Székelykeresztúr, Transylvania, Romania

“Hospitality,” Gail Godwin says, “is having ready what is needed... hospitality is making room in yourself for the new and the strange and the other... hospitality is stretching your boundaries to include the larger picture, with all its contradictions and loose ends, rather than dividing life into security-tight compartments that keep things neat and unthreatening and familiar.” This is why we describe our trips to Transylvania as pilgrimages, stretching our boundaries, making the world bigger.

“We live in an era of disturbing violence,” Rabbi Goldstein writes from New York City in 2004, “of terror alerts, of alienation from even our own families. We live during a dark period in time, and its evolution is uncertain and unsettling... Our own spiritual heritage (and now I am thinking of Abraham and Sarah’s tent) our own spiritual heritage... offers correctives, pathways that allow us to regain the anchors of community we so deeply crave... One of the basic rules of tribal life (and now I am thinking of the wedding there in Mongolia and the food and the drink) one of the basic rules is that the motivation for our behavior is grounded, not in what we want to do, but in what we ought to do.

“Abraham’s tent,” he says, “was exposed to every direction; it was welcoming, but it made him vulnerable. That is precisely the point: it is only through vulnerability that genuine community can emerge, that commitment and compassion become intertwined and inseparable. Both require a risk on our part, and both necessitate that we make a leap of faith... a leap for humanity.”

It is late afternoon and evening now in Transylvania. A month from now more than twenty of us will be there in their homes, in their church, in their new community center; we will sit in circles and sing; we will weave cloth with them; we will sit together at tables and eat and drink. We will fill each other’s emptiness; we will practice the spiritual discipline of hospitality. We will give and we will receive, and we will not know the difference.

This is the allure of Transylvania, I think, but it happens around the world. It’s happened to us on Worcester Street in Belmont. It can happen here, here at First Parish, in your neighborhood, in your home. Remember the tent of Abraham, open to every direction, open to every stranger, radical hospitality, a pathway “to regain the anchors of community we so deeply crave,” each and all of us, around this precious world of ours, even half a world away, around that bend, there is the school, the parsonage, the church, the gate, the courtyard, the people, blessings everywhere. Blessings everywhere.