



Where the Heart Is

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Reading

New Revised Standard Version: Genesis 18

1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Good morning! My name is Georgine Getty and I have the good fortune to be the director of Interfaith Hospitality Network of Greater Cincinnati. Thank you for inviting me here today to speak about our mission.

In a lot of ways, IHN is a traditional emergency shelter: food and overnight lodging, case management and access to services are provided to homeless families.

What makes IHN unique is that we are a network of 27 host congregations and 66 support congregations who take turns opening up their doors to make sure that homeless families have a place to lay their heads. As most of you know, First Unitarian is a host congregation. IHN has congregational representation from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian faith communities. We are also one of only two shelters in the city that keep families together by accepting fathers as well as mothers. At IHN, fathers say goodnight to their children, not goodbye. In 2012, IHNGC served 96 families composed of 367 individuals and provided 27,696 meals. 90% of the families we served exited for housing and less than 20% of them will EVER return to homelessness.

But here is the sobering truth about homeless families. Homeless Families are invisible in our community because they do not fit our stereotypes about homelessness. The reality is that in 2012, 30% of Hamilton County's homeless people were children; 10% were under the age of 5. Families tend not to be homeless in public. Most homeless families will stay with various friends and family before things become dire enough for them to seek emergency shelter. You would not know a child was homeless if you saw her waiting at the bus stop or heading off to school.

Family homelessness peaks in the summer months and decreases in the winter months. This is because homeless families are more likely to be able to stay with friends and families undetected when their children are in school. Also, many homeless moms and dads work and are able to utilize their tax returns in February and March to obtain housing, at least for a few weeks.

In July, 2013 **432** separate families called the Central Access Point hotline seeking help. 432 mothers and fathers reached the end of their rope and made the hard decision to enter a shelter. This is a 26% increase in need from July of 2012. Of the 432 families who called, 39 were provided with emergency shelter and 33 were offered preventative services. Even working together as a system, the family shelters were only able to meet 17% of the need. That left 360 families who did not receive help. Where did they go? Honestly, I don't know, but I have an idea. And that idea keeps me up at night.

When you volunteer with IHN, you work with people who defy the stereotype. When I look at a mother or father struggling to make it, I see a lack of work that pays a decent wage, I see a healthcare system that is currently unresponsive and inaccessible. I see a lack of safe, affordable housing. I see systemic poverty, generational poverty, poverty that we have all begun to accept as just part of the landscape.

I see mothers and fathers who love their children. I see children who hold all of the potential in the world, as all children do, but who will have to work just that much harder to get an education, to find nutrition for their bodies, to feel safe, to follow their dreams, Kids who will have to fight to prove that there is space for them in this land, room for them in some sort of promise in this country.

You can help. You do help. Let me tell you what it means to be a part of Interfaith Hospitality Network.

Interfaith. Interfaith is like a braid. Each strand maintains its integrity and its identity, but woven together with other strands it becomes something new, something strong, something different and beautiful.

Our faith connects us to our history. Despite religious difference, rooted deep in many Western faith traditions is Abraham's story of displacement. God asked Abraham for his trust, and set many challenges before him as he wandered, looking for home. This memory of displacement is rooted deep within our marrow. But Abraham's is also a story of faith: faith in God's promise of a place in this world. Is it any wonder that we, Abraham's children, feel an instinctual empathy for those who are still looking for a home? On some level, we always remember how it feels.

Maybe this is why the search for a home remains at the core of many of our stories; religious and secular. What was it that Dorothy was seeking? Or any immigrant? Why does Katniss draw her bow? Why do our hearts ache for refugees with all of their possessions on their back? Or the victims of natural disasters? Home is the destination of every hero myth and every journey from Ulysses to Don Corleone, from Celie in the Color Purple to the Joads in the Grapes of Wrath. From George Bailey to Langston Hughes. Home. It is a prophesy and a promise, the shared dream that puts the Interfaith in our name and keeps it pulsing with life.

Hospitality. In Genesis 18, upon meeting the three strangers, Abraham said, "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant."

Imagine how hostile this ancient desert was. Abraham's hospitality is the only thing standing between these strangers and death. But we have no record of Abraham saying, "man, you three owe me Big Time!" because that is not how he approached them. "Since you have come to your servant."

The hallmark of a well-lived life lies in service. Interconnection and interdependence makes us human. When we are in crisis, travelling to an uncertain future, tired, hungry, weak, that is when we most need the hospitality of others, paid forward in faith. Abraham expected no money for his hospitality or even a lasting relationship with the strangers. In recognizing the needs of others and in meeting that need, we recognize our own frailty and our own humanity.

My father died the week before Thanksgiving. The evening he died, I have never felt at such a loss. I did not know what to do and, in a way, I was in my own personal desert. My mother, sister, grandma and I looked to one another for help, but we were all feeling the same loss and the same uncertainty. Then the doorbell rang. It was JoAnne Hovey, a woman from my mom's church. She had a shells and cheese casserole, pineapple and a coffee cake. I just stared at her. She hugged me, told me to take the food and put it on the table and bring back her basket.

“Eat.” She said. “Eat with your family.” And then she left. JoAnne broke the spell. We ate. Then we ate seconds – amazed at how hungry we were. We told stories. We planned the funeral. We realized that life would go on.

JoAnne Hovey took on an almost mythic status in my eyes that evening. As I look back now, I realize that we were just one stop in a number of good deeds that JoAnne does every day. Goodness is a habit for her, as is service. That’s why she needed her basket back.

Think of the state of grief that our guests are in when come to you. They have experienced their own loss, again and again. You might not be their Abraham that night, or their JoAnn Hovey, but then again, you might be. It is in the moment of receiving hospitality, that we are at our most human. It is in the moment of giving hospitality, that we are at our most human. It is in this connection; human to human, that we are most likely to touch the divine.

Network. Network is where the work lives. Network is the part that gets it done because nobody can or should do it alone.

Back to Abraham. Right after Abraham offered hospitality the verse goes, ““Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.”

Did you catch that? Abraham made the promise to serve the strangers, but it was Sarah and the rest of the household who all worked together to get it done. Sarah baked the bread, Abraham picked the calf, a servant prepared it, someone drew the water, someone else threw together a cheese plate and you know *someone* had to wash the dishes. It takes WORK to provide hospitality. But when work is done with others, it becomes light and when work is done for others, it becomes lighter still.

Homelessness is huge, but it’s not insurmountable. Homelessness is ugly, but there are moments of beauty in it. Homelessness can only happen in the dark spaces that are left when good people look away. I know, I know, that this country is big enough to hold us all. It’s about shifting the script from scarcity to abundance and knowing that you do have the time, you do have talent, you do have resources and you can make space at the table for someone who needs it.

Unitarian Clergyman Edward Everett Hale once said

**I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;**

**And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.**

I use this statement wherever I speak because it is important to remember. It is easy to become stunned into silence by the immensity of injustice, immobilized by its enormity.

But there are families, neighbors, kids, in our city who need you. So we serve. We serve when people are grateful, and we serve when people are hateful. We serve when there are other places we'd rather be, and we serve when there's nowhere we'd rather be in the world than right here, right now. We serve mothers and fathers as our mothers and fathers taught us. We serve children because we know they will one day be the adults who serve the world. We serve the broken, and we serve when we are broken and somewhere along the line, we all find ourselves whole.