

Let us linger today in this ancient story where Abraham welcomes 3 strangers into his tent, and by the time the cakes are baked and the fatted calf roasted we discover it is God who has come to Abraham in the guise of a stranger.

Folded into this story is the cultural norm of hospitality to strangers – those who are unknown and different from us. It raises the possibility that we too might discover God in the guise of strangers standing on our doorstep.

It encourages us to step back and open a space in our inner circle for outsiders – offering them a seat at the table, a voice in the gathering. And it raises up the possibility that in so doing, we might just encounter God in our guests.

So let's challenge ourselves, sharpen our focus and consider who was not included in this intimate scene of generosity and welcome.

First, was Sarah. She who baked the cakes, who would bear in her body the promised child and face the perils of childbirth in her golden years Sarah did not sit at the table with Abraham and God, but stood at the tent's edge and eavesdropped.

You might argue that such was the custom in those days, but it is good to recognize that the womb which was essential to bring God's promise into reality was also an absolute barrier to her seat at the table. Sarah was left standing outside.

Although she was not alone. She may have baked the cakes but there were other workers who made possible the fatted calf of the feast – who prepared and seasoned the lamb, who turned the spit. They too were left outside, barred by their status from the table, waiting for leftovers for their dinner.

The point of these stories – and Jesus' parables as well – is to challenge us again and again....to shake us up and ask us to question our practices, our beliefs, our blind spots. They challenge us to allow God to be God.

These stories challenge cultural norms which we have **mistaken for divine directives** which have **given us permission** to leave those who look or talk or act different standing outside the tent of God. We give ourselves permission to close ranks, to pass judgment, and thus to exclude them from a table where Jesus is host.

For centuries these cultural norms left all the Sarahs – all the women of faith – barred from a place in the pulpit, from being a servant of the Word of God in Jesus through the office of pastor. Children and divorced people have been barred from the Lord's table.

Look at Mary and Martha. Martha was right. Mary should have been in the kitchen making sure the buns didn't burn instead of sitting on her buns among the men listening to Jesus. Who did she think she was? And yet, in the end, Martha was wrong. There was not only one place for Mary, not only one task for her no matter what the 'rules' might say.

These ancient stories also challenge our vision: who DO we see and who remains invisible to us? It is as if we have cataracts in need of surgery.

It is an amazing experience to have cataracts removed from your eyes. Without those yellowed lenses the entire world is brighter, colors are true and frankly, night driving is safer.

We all have spiritual cataracts of varying degrees. We have certain people who permanently stand on the edges – out of our

line of sight, forgotten or rejected when invitations to God's table are extended.

Whenever I feel judgment against another rising up within me, someone who's caused me no harm, but who is strange somehow, I know that these children of God are standing behind my clouded vision. So I am challenged to remove my spiritual cataracts and open myself to the stranger, the one who is God among us.

Finally, these ancient stories challenge our practices: the practices which mark our religious life, but have also become chiseled in stone, assuming holy status.....and yet these are practices which lack meaning for those outside the tent who are seeking welcome and sustenance. Those who are seeking God.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves "Is attending Sunday morning worship in a church building wearing our 'Sunday best' necessary for a life of faith and faithfulness?"

Must the folks who stand outside come to us and meet our norms or is there a way to open up other possibilities? Can we stretch our own comfort zone for the love of God?

Are we allowing a person's choice of pronouns to exclude them from our fellowship?

Is rainbow colored hair really a reasonable barrier to the baptismal font and a place among the baptized children of God?

If Jesus is the one who guides our lives and sustains us even in the darkest times, then how can we share the wonder of God's love in Jesus with those who know no love and are never welcomed?

The stories of the Bible are stories of faith from another time and folk who are very different from us. They are meant to meet us where we are but move us to a new place: a place of deeper spirituality, of more questions than answers.

If we read these stories with the question “What am I not hearing? Who am I not seeing in this story?” then what might we learn and how might we change?

So today I ask, Who is missing from the table of God here in Herkimer? What does the God who is waiting outside our door, the one who is disguised as a stranger – what does God look like?

Who longs for the sustenance that can be found at the table of God and is dying to be invited in?

And what will we do about it?