

Hosting God

Manners

I come from pretty down to earth people. My Dad repaired TVs and record players and my mother worked in her father's bakery down at the corner. But when we sat down to eat, we always had to remember our manners. Nothing fancy mind you, but your basic "you-can't-put the-potatoes-on-the-table- right-in-cooking-pot-not-even-on-weekdays" kind of manners. You're not allowed to slurp your tea. (Of course this ended the day my old grampa Stapleton came to live with us and having only a few teeth left in his head, would pop a whole cookie in his mouth, slurp in a big swig of tea and sort of gum the cookie into mushy pieces.)

But – not every Sunday, but quite often on Sunday -- Mom would insist on using her fine china and silverware for dinner. Laid out on the linen, big fork, little fork, big spoon, little spoon extra paste just for your bread. goblets, candles. And after the roast beef dinner and the pie and ice cream, the dishes always needed to be done with a methodical gentleness usually only reserved for brain surgery. (And to this day, every piece of the Royal Dalton china my mother received on her wedding day over 50 years ago remains intact)

So, one evening in the middle of dinner with our fussy Sunday manners in full operation, I asked my mother, "How come we need all these extra manners on Sunday that we don't need the rest of the week?"

She said, "Well, Doug, you never know, *one day you might have to eat with the Queen.*" That remains a rather unlikely possibility. But for my mother, the "Sunday best manners thing" was a kind of a "fire-drill" for a day when I would be thankful I knew how to behave. (Although I can't imagine even sitting at the heavenly banquet without my grampa still slurping on his tea) But in every home there always one set of manners that are "all in the family", and another that are far more important when it comes to . . .

Strangers

The Book of Hebrews tells us we should be always hospitable strangers. Mind your manners. Because you never know when you might be hosting the angels. At your dinner table this evening, *you could find yourself hosting God.*

It was not a likely possibility. They had been waiting a long, long time. *But maybe that was just God's quirky sense of humour:* He's 99 years old (17:1). She's 89 (17:17). Talk about a high-risk pregnancy! And Imagine! Two old people, embarking on the great adventure of parenting! The elderly Abraham and Sarah are about to experience the most significant, rewarding, yet challenging days of their lives. Three mysterious strangers arrive, they will eat lunch, then they will leave. But it will not be the usual small talk over lunch: one of these travellers suddenly comes out with an incredibly strange promise to the old couple, and before meal is over it dawns on Abraham that he is not entertaining three passers-by, he dining in the presence of the LORD himself. God has shown up, in person to make an incredibly important announcement to Abraham. A LONG STANDING PROMISE to Abraham was about to be fulfilled. A miracle child was about to be conceived and then born. But this *unique* promise would test Abraham's faith to the breaking point. Maybe true faith is always . . .

High Risk

The *faith* of this one, ancient Hebrew would be instrumental in the fulfilment of God's salvation of all humankind. God was taking an enormous *risk*. Yet through Abraham's descendants another miracle child would be born --of the virgin, the Word made flesh, redeem the world from sin. For God, there is a lot riding on the faith of this nomadic herdsman. Risky business.

Yet Abraham is also taking an incredible risk. This solitary nomad lives in the desert, in a no-man's land. He is a man of considerable wealth, but with no gated community. No state. No law enforcement. Vulnerable. Elderly. But with a fortune in sheep and goats at stake, he opens his heart and home to three total strangers. In that extremely hostile environment of the desert, the mere act of hospitality to strangers was itself a risk. But the story the God who comes to us eats and drinks with us is one in which risk meets . . .

Faith

Everything throughout Abraham's long life has seemed to be one long *extreme* test of his faith. Since leaving the big city of UR as a younger man, he has lived his nomadic life in the rugged back country of Canaan which lies between the two great civilizations of the time: Mesopotamia in the North and Egypt to the South. This is the land of Canaan, where their lives always have hung on the thinnest of threads. One murderous raid by desert marauders could spell the end for Abraham. They live one drought away from either starvation or a dangerous sojourn into some other foreign land where they could easily lose everything including their lives. Live has been one long test of faith. And now, having survived into in their twilight years Abraham and Sarah must come to their greatest crisis of belief.

"Does this god I thought I heard calling me out of city of my birth as a young man really even exist? Could this god be, after all, merely a *delusion*? And if he does exist, is this so-called god I've been praying to all these years really any different from any other god? Gods of my fathers? gods worshipped all around me in the land of Caanan? Have I deluded myself as I raised these altars out here in the desert to a god who is after all merely a figment of my imagination? And if he does exist and has promised to give me this land and descendants to populate this land, then why, at age 99, *hasn't it already happened?*

Why do I have to go through such an unusual testing of faith?

But perhaps God did this to these two people living in a remote desert between two ancient civilizations, as an example for us. Perhaps they are role models for us in their violently stark trials of faith. For they face, essentially, the same testings that we ourselves face.

Abraham's story is really about nature of FAITH -- What does it mean to trust our god completely with the next 24 hrs of our lives, and then the next, and then the next? To trust God and put ourselves out there despite the risks? To trust God without any visible proof that what he has promised will eventually happen? And if the next 24 hours turned out to be the most important day of your life, would you pass the test of genuine faith? Would you trust God even without. . .

A Sense of His Presence

Time magazine this week features as its cover story letters written by Mother Teresa that have been released a decade after her death that show that she spent almost 50 years without sensing the presence of God in her life. These letters show that the Nobel-peace prize-winning nun who is such a world icon of faith in her blue-bordered head covering and sandals, caring for the sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta *lived a life of deep spiritual agony*. These letters written over the years to her various confessors and spiritual advisors show that the woman was a walking contradiction. The story told in these letters that she herself wanted destroyed is that Shortly after beginning her work in India in 1948, all sense of Christ's presence withdrew from Mother Teresa. From that point on, she writes of dryness, darkness, loneliness. At one point she even doubts the existence of God and heaven. These letters give a shocking view into the inner life of a modern saint.

But they also tell us something about the true nature of faith.

The tendency in our culture is that in our spirituality, *feelings* are really what it's really all

about. And so, too has our culture defined love as how we *feel* about someone .

But if we truly love someone, it requires faithfulness and commitment and vulnerability. And these remarkable letters paint a picture of a Mother Teresa who continued to get up every morning at 4:30 and live for Jesus, for 50 years even though she wasn't feeling his presence.

And if the truth be known, this is the experience of average believers. We all, at times feel abandoned by God. We can even doubt his existence. Who would have thought that a woman who was considered to be one of the most faithful women in the world *struggled* with her faith? Who would have thought that this women who modelled such a profound faith in Jesus to the world was herself also part skeptic?

So as Abraham serves the meal to his guests, just inside the tent sits a . . .

Skeptic

Sarah sits listening through the wall of the tent as the stranger repeats the old promise of a son for Abraham. Put it on your calendar, "about this time next year." We can well understand she is a little cynical." "What a joke!" she says, "I'm *ninety years old!*" So she *laughs*. It's a sarcastic laugh, a laugh that comes from a shaken confidence. It's the joyless laugh at sense of abandoned dreams. She *used to* hope --in her youth. But now? "My body is aging and failing, and I've never had the joy of nursing a child --even though God *promised I would BUT NOW?*"

You and I live in a deeply cynical age. We laugh. Can rational people really be expected to believe that 3,000 years ago some elderly bedouin woman conceived and bore a child? But it's the wrong question. It a question borne of *cynical* age. But the mysterious traveller at Abrahams's table ask an entirely different but far more *fundamental* question in v14.

Is there anything too hard for the Lord?

Is there really a God? Or are we alone? Do we look out on galaxies devoid of meaning? Is there a purpose to all this? When the cold calculating light of science can unlock the mysteries of human DNA -- the very code of life -- are we looking at the result mere random chance -- a really, really lucky roll of the cosmic dice?

There are only two destinations we can arrive at: either faith in God is complete nonsense and will eventually disappear from human experience OR it will come full circle again back to the faith question posed by a mysterious stranger 3,000 years ago to a sceptical old women listening through the wall of her tent.

Is there anything too hard for the Lord?

Is it really beyond rational thinking that a being who could design the spiral of human DNA could not at one point in humna history not cause a sudden an unique rush of hormones into an aged woman's body, so that a once in the history of the race conception could occur? Yet Sarah is still sceptical. She is however, somewhere on the journey to becoming a woman of . .

Hope

Hope is simply believing that God will *never ever break a promise*. What's the most "impossible thing" that's ever happened to you?

Elisabeth Elliot published The following story in her 1995 book, "Keep A Quiet Heart" (Servant Publications, Ann Arbor Michigan). She assures all doubters that it is, indeed, a *true* story and says the story is a first-person account given to her by Brenda Foltz of Princeton, Minnesota.

Brenda was a young woman who was invited to go rock climbing. Although she was scared to death, she went with her group to a tremendous granite cliff.

In spite of her fear, she put on the gear, took a hold on the rope, and started up the face of that rock. Well, she got to a ledge where she could take a breather.

As she was hanging on there, the safety rope snapped against Brenda's eye and knocked out her contact lens.

Well, here she is on a rock ledge, with hundreds of feet below her and hundreds of feet above her. Of course, she looked and looked and looked, hoping it had landed on the ledge, but it just wasn't there. Here she was, far from home, her sight now blurry. She was desperate and began to get upset, so she prayed to the Lord to help her to find it. When she got to the top, a friend examined her eye and her clothing for the lens, but there was no contact lens to be found.

She sat down, despondent, with the rest of the party, waiting for the rest of them to make it up the face of the cliff. She looked out across range after range of mountains, thinking of that Bible verse that says, "The eyes of the Lord run to and from throughout the whole earth." She thought, "Lord, You can see all these mountains. You know every stone and leaf, and You know exactly where my contact lens is. Please help me."

Finally, they walked down the trail to the bottom. At the bottom there was a new party of climbers just starting up the face of the cliff. One of them shouted out, "Hey, you guys! Anybody lose a contact lens?"

Well, that would be startling enough, but you know why the climber saw it? An ant was moving slowly across the face of the rock, carrying it.

As Sarah listened from behind the wall of her tent her heart was cynical, skeptical dry, broken. Yet on just the other side of the fabric, was God who knew she teetering on the brink of utter despair. But he promised to do the impossible. And God is just that close to you and I today. In this bread and cup, Jesus is just on the other side of the fabric of the universe. He is present here. And he is offering to do the most remarkable and seemingly impossible thing: to forgive us our sins and give us eternal life.

In the midst of our personal problems, in a deeply cynical age in which we live, we can so easily succumb in our everyday grind to the sinking sands of hopelessness, atheism and unbelief -- that things will never improve, only worsen. But God has wonderful medicine for the sad and hopeless heart. It is a cure that despite ourselves works it's cure. It's called . . .

The Common Laugh

In fact, if we take our faith seriously, sometimes the only thing we can do in a confusing world where God's purposes are not always clear, to shrug our shoulders, laugh, like Sarah, and say, "OK, God, you win".

God's encounter with Sarah teaches us that *laughter is a very spiritual experience*. Though she laughed, she denied that she laughed. But the Lord's gentle rebuke had such a wonderful effect on her that when child was born he was named him "Isaac" which means "he laughs".

How could she not laugh at the idea of having a child in old age, but in the joy of the birth of her son.

The story of Abraham Sarah and Isaac should teach us that one of the fruits of our lips with which God is pleased is our LAUGHTER. When we have faith, we can laugh and cling to the promises even when the evidence seems to point in the other direction. Even when life seems like a not-so-funny joke.

Madeleine L'Engle

"If we are sure of our God we are free to *laugh* at ourselves. . . It's all part of what helps keep us in proportion; we can best take ourselves *seriously* if we are free to *laugh* at ourselves, and to *enjoy the laughter of God and his angels*. As Bishop William Temple once remarked, "It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in religion."