

“The Welcome Table”  
October 3, 2021—World Communion Sunday  
Scripture: Genesis 18:1-10; Luke 18:15-17

One of my most favorite activities since coming to North is the Abraham Walk. Every year during the Islamic month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast each day from sunup to sundown, a group made up of Jews, Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths gathers here at the church to walk up North Forest Road to Heim Road, then take a right to the Masjid An-Noor Mosque, about four and a half to five miles. When we get there we spend time hearing about the history of Ramadan and other Islamic practices and then join in breaking the day's fast with the iftar meal.

The dinner we share is known as Abraham's Table, and it has its origin in the story we just heard from Genesis. Our three faiths, Jewish, Christian and Islam, share a common heritage through Abraham, so this story about his encounter is part of all our histories. Abraham's Table is a beautiful expression of unity and hospitality. It is the original “welcome table,” with deep roots in Middle Eastern culture. And that's pretty much been my understanding of it, both as it's presented in Genesis and at the mosque. I've always considered it a wonderful gesture of interfaith cooperation and respect, something I haven't experienced much in other places where I've lived.

But recently I was reading a new commentary on Genesis by Kathleen O'Conner. Usually I don't read commentaries from cover to cover, and I don't often pay much attention to the introduction in them because that material is mostly what I learned in seminary. They're not generally written for people with a background in biblical studies. But her interpretation uses a lens that's unique. She contends, and I think she's right, that Genesis in the form we have it now was compiled while the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. My understanding of that has been that they did that in order to maintain their identity and not be absorbed by Babylonian culture. It was sort of an act of resistance. That may be true, but she proposes it was also a way of processing trauma.

O'Conner uses the insights of trauma therapy, a growing field of study, to understand what lies behind the stories of Genesis. Like all other writings scripture is meant for particular audiences living in specific historical circumstances. The audience for Genesis is a remnant of Israel that has been forced from their home, carrying the memory of the destruction of their temple and capital city and the slaughter of their political leaders with them. They are a deeply traumatized people. Healing from that trauma requires finding ways to express the feelings of loss and anger and sadness through representative stories that can help restore some measure of hope.

Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, welcoming strangers with open arms and generosity, represents the possibility of learning to trust again for people whose capacity to trust even God

has been all but shattered. Imagine how a story like that is heard by people whose lives have been so damaged. Reading her interpretation of Genesis caused me to think differently about the event at the mosque. Many of the members there have come from deeply traumatic circumstances. Many of the immigrants in our community are refugees. They've been forced to leave intolerable and dangerous situations to seek stability and safety. What does it mean for them to offer a welcome table to strangers? I'm reminded especially of the massacres that occurred in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 and the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. How do people learn to trust strangers after experiences like that?

Abraham welcoming strangers to his home and offering them hospitality is an expression of hope. Learning to sit again at the welcome table is a step toward healing. And I think understanding this story in that way suggests a way for us to redefine what we're doing when we celebrate World Communion. This has always been an ecumenical celebration, one where we can lift up the unity of Christians in all parts of the world. That's a noble thing to do and very much needed in a world where Christians too often are in conflict with one another. But it seems there's a need for an even broader understanding of what we're doing here. This table could represent more than an exclusively Christian icon.

In a world where faith groups live side by side we need ways to practice welcome that reach beyond our understanding and experience of God. The image of Christ as a universal figure, one that represents connection to the divine that transcends orthodoxy and doctrine, and can offer a path to God alongside the paths found in Torah or Buddha or Quran, is worth exploring to discover how we might create a truly welcome table where everyone is invited and has a place. It could be a way to acknowledge the trauma others have endured and provide a means of healing and hope. This table is intended to encompass the whole world but to do that we may need to find ways of interpreting its meaning so that even people of other faiths can find a place here, rather than simply seeking to convert the world to our way of thinking.

The New Testament doesn't really have a parallel story to the one about Abraham in Genesis, but it does insist on inclusion and welcome. There's no better example of that than this story from Luke. Children in the biblical world were often given little regard. A great teacher like Jesus certainly wouldn't be expected to spend time with them. What his disciples do to prevent their coming to him was expected and normal. But Jesus isn't having it. In this story he becomes the welcome table to which even children, the most vulnerable in every society of any era including our own, are invited to find a place and be acknowledged. It's a powerful symbol of welcome for those who too often are traumatized. This story offers the possibility that anyone can find a path toward healing and no one should be kept away.

Offering a welcome table to the world is a central obligation for those of us committed to following Jesus. One question we may want to ask is how does our welcome ignore the real trauma that so many carry with them. What are some ways we can acknowledge that trauma and provide more than a meal but the promise of restored hope and healing? What we do here, the

ways we invite others, our willingness to remove obstacles, the validation we offer can transform us into the welcome table God desires everyone to find: a lavish meal in the desert with the power to restore the world's hope.

Amen