

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, July 22, 2007
9:30 a.m.

“By the Road to the Market Town”
Genesis 18:1-8

I always get excited when the lectionary readings coincide with what I'd like to preach about—it's a comforting synchronicity that somehow reinforces the notion that God and I are on the same page, that what my little mind deems important has been blessed by a higher authority—a little magical thinking, I know, but it works for me! Needless to say, I was virtually ecstatic when I learned that this week's text from Genesis is about hospitality, for radical hospitality is precisely what my time at Iona Abbey was about.

For those of you who may not be familiar with Iona, it is first of all a tiny island on the southwestern edge of the Scottish Highlands, off the coast of the Isle of Mull to be specific. It is bare and windswept and beautiful, populated by sheep, a few vacationers, four retreat centers and about ten cars. No matter who you are, getting to Iona is nearly impossible. My trip from the Isle of Skye required two busses, three ferries, and ten hours of traveling.

So why do visitors flock to this remote spot? Historically, it was the spiritual center of Christian Britain from the sixth century to the Reformation, and remains the most sacred site in all of Celtic Christendom today. Its patron Saint is Columba, who left Ireland in 563 and established a monastery on the island from which he launched missions into the Northern regions of Scotland, throughout Britain and even into Europe. The magnificent illustrated gospels, The Book of Kells, were created on Iona. Most of all, as I said in last month's Clarion, Iona is a “thin place,” a space where spiritual seekers of all kinds experience a mystical connection with the divine.

To stay at the restored 13th century Abbey, to live as part of what is called the Iona Community—a global ecumenical church devoted to peace, justice and prayer—is just about every pastor's dream. But Iona was not what I expected; it is not what *anyone* expects, a lovely retreat center, idyllic for long walks and private reflection. Iona is *anything* but private. Smashed into a tiny communal space with fifty people from fourteen countries, many of whom do not speak English and with

whom you must work and study and worship from eight in the morning to ten at night is work.

Day after day, we set tables and made toast and peeled vegetables and washed dishes and scrubbed bathrooms and sang and prayed and ate and deliberated and talked endlessly together. But this was not the work of Iona; the work was learning how to practice hospitality, not the “let me make you a meal” kind, but that powerful, Christ-inspired, world-changing state of heart in which a “*hostis*,” or enemy, is transformed into a “*hospes*” or guest. Not everyone who comes to Iona makes it; some find the experience too intense and leave. The point is this, though Abraham and Sarah make it look easy in today’s scripture lesson—a little bread here, a fatted calf there—true hospitality is a bonafide spiritual art.

How do you measure up on the hospitality scale? How do we score as a church? Seattle Pastor Kathlyn James describes a Sociology of Religion course in which she was required to take a monthly “cultural plunge,” to deliberately place herself in an unfamiliar situation and actively participate in it. Some students went to the racetrack, others choose a Rocky Horror Picture Show. Soup kitchens, Native American sweat lodges, a Star Trek convention—the list was endless and the theology sound, when you develop the habit of adapting to strangers again and again, differences dissolve into harmonies—our sameness becomes positively obvious. When was the last time you plunged into something strange and menacing just for the fun of it? What would happen if you, too, made an intentional effort to make an interpersonal leap? That’s one thing to think about.

Hospitality requires more than the cessation of hostility towards strangers, however. It requires a radical suspension of judgment, a complete abandonment of the compartmentalization of people that brings us so much blasted comfort—“he’s an alcoholic, she’s a divorcee, he’s homeless, she’s hopeless.” On Iona, our interactions were heavily laced with ethnic and national generalizations. The Germans were unbearably loud and bossy, the Finns were quiet and shy, the east-end Jamaican cockneys were hilarious, the Sri Lankan refugees were sad (understandably), and the Americans were, well, Americans. I bet you’re thinking you would never stoop to that kind of thinking, but you would and you do, every day, even though you mean well. My group at Iona was mightily enlightened, yet I still watched painfully one day as an older white woman kept asking one of our black leaders, “But where are you from?” “Nottingham,” she replied. “No, I mean where are you *from*?” “Nottingham,” she replied. “No, I mean your parents,

where did they come from?” “Oh, I get it, *London*,” she replied. In what ways do you deny each and every person you encounter their God-given right to be complex? What would happen if you erased this kind of thinking from your repertoire?

That’s another thing to think about.

Which brings us to the final thing that hospitality requires, perhaps the hardest thing of all, says Rev. James: “to actively create an open, empty space into which strangers can come and find themselves at home.” A hospitable heart is not one that is overflowing with hubris, or opinion, or need, but one that is peaceful and safe enough to allow others to enter in. Are you that kind of person, or are your interactions colored by your own moods or disgruntlements or agendas? One last thing to think about.

I’d like to leave you this morning with an image, a thought and a poem. The first image is of me. It’s Saturday evening around seven and I’ve just stepped off the last ferry to Iona. I have been traveling since 8:00 that morning. I am the last guest to arrive on the Island for the week and I know it. Hungry, exhausted, I’m lugging a forty pound suitcase that has gotten heavier by the hour. Everyone is already there. I’ve missed the orientation. I spy the Abbey a disheartening distance away and grab gird myself for the trek up the hill.

Then someone shouts in a large drawl, “Hey! You must be Cindy; we’ve been waiting for you!” He snags my bag and heaves it into a green van. Two minutes later we’re standing in the foyer. “Drop your bags right here, we’ll get them later. Right now you must be famished!” Our footsteps echo as we hustle up a flight of stone steps. A large oak door swings wide and I am assaulted, *assaulted*, by the most incredible sense of welcome I have ever known. Candlelight fills the room from table to ceiling. Long tables are overflowing with food. The air is brimming with excitement and conversation. I step through the door. Everyone turns. All the talking stops. Then another voice—“You made it!” shouts Lois, our program director. Then everyone cheers as I take my place at the table. I’m sure there are tears in my eyes.

Like Abraham waiting for God, my arrival at the Abbey had been anticipated—space had been made, not just at the table but in the hearts of the fifty people I would soon come to know. For those of use who make our home in Christ, we are asked not just to suspend our petty preoccupations and prejudices, but to actively

prepare our hearts and lives to receive those we are called upon to love. Is this not *precisely* the work of the church, even in a world that doesn't think it needs the church? Is this not *exactly* what we strive to do and create here at *our* church week after week? Christian hospitality is a collective generosity of heart—and if you, in your hunger have found this kind of spiritual bounty on the other side of a wooden door, you will know that you have met Jesus Christ indeed.

Let me close with an excerpt from, *The Gardener*, by the great Indian writer RABINDRO-NATH TAGORE:

Ah me, why did they build my house by the road to the market town?
They moor their laden boats near my trees.
They come and go and wander at their will.
I sit and watch them; my time wears on.
Turn them away I cannot. And thus my days pass by.

Night and day their steps sound by my door. Vainly I cry, 'I do not know you.'
Some of them are known to my fingers, some to my nostrils, the blood in my veins seems to know them, and some are known to my dreams.
Turn them away I cannot. I call them and say, 'Come to my house whoever chooses. Yes, come.' . . . Amen.