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***Appearances. Feasting. Hope and delight.***

The ages of CMCL staff right now span from 20-something to 50-something (yes, I can say that – at least for three more months!) At the moment, our “children” range in age from Amanda and Zack’s two-year-old to our 37-year-old daughter-in-law. This week, those of us who are parents were talking about how parenting is a role that stays with you your whole life. You may initially think in terms of an 18- to 22-year commitment – and of course those are the most active years of parenting for most of us. But it gradually occurs to you over the years – being a parent is for a lifetime.

This idea first dawned on me one day when I worked at Tel Hai Retirement Community. A woman in her early 90’s came to me. She was expecting a visit from her daughter, who would have been around 65-years-old. In a worried voice, she said, “My daughter said she’d be here ten minutes ago. I hope she didn’t have a car accident!”

As author Elizabeth Stone wrote, “Making the decision to have a child...is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/251288.Elizabeth\\_Stone](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/251288.Elizabeth_Stone)

### ***Seeking welcome in the desert***

One of the many times when this has been clear to us as parents was when our trans son was in the last year of a Ph.D. program in German at University of Waterloo in Ontario. Our daughter-in-law had just completed her Ph.D. – also in German - and she was looking for her first teaching position. German departments were closing around the world and the job market was extremely tight. But two live possibilities emerged.

The first was Bowdoin - a small liberal arts college in Maine, a state in the more progressive northeast and also our family’s favorite vacation destination. Bowdoin’s website talked about their commitment to “the Common Good”: “no matter what fields we pursue, we can make them more accessible and ethical by making space for empathy, understanding, context, and history.”

<https://www.bowdoin.edu/about/common-good/index.html>

The second option was Texas Tech, a large university in northwest Texas (a state that we do not usually think of as progressive and twice as far away from family). Texas

Tech's "About" page is entitled "The Spirit of Raiderland" and features their mascot – a red furry character with a huge cowboy hat – who uses the hand signal of their athletic slogan: *Guns up!* (which apparently was originally *Gun 'Em Down!*)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guns\\_Up](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guns_Up)

As probably goes without saying - as Anabaptist parents of adult children in the LGBTQ community, our hearts walking around outside our bodies pulsed a simple prayer: *Maine, Maine, Maine!*

Then we got the news. Bowdoin was filling their position with someone who had previously taught there. But Texas Tech was offering a tenure track professorship.

The promise of a steady salary and benefits after so many years of study and financial struggle was huge. So, of course, I knew they had to jump at this opportunity!

But my first reaction was disbelief: *This cannot be happening!* If I'd tried to write a fictional story about the thing least likely to happen in the life of our family, our LGBTQ family members moving to rural northwest Texas could have actually been part of the plot line.

Yes – in an impossibly tight job market, a much-prayed-for job for our daughter-in-law had appeared. But everything in me resisted. It just didn't feel safe for them. The first thing we did was google Mennonite churches in Lubbock, Texas. Nothing. As parents, we knew from experience how tough life can be. We also knew from experience what it means to be part of a community with whom to do life and faith – people who are there for one another in good times and bad, and who help figure out what it means to follow Jesus Christ in our real lives as they keep unfolding over time. What I've most wanted for my kids as adults is the opportunity to be part of that kind of community in the world.

Was there a congregation somewhere in the desert of northwest Texas that might be a safe and welcoming community if our dear "strangers" chose to appear at their door?

### ***Appearances***

When I read this morning's text in preparation for our second Pride Sunday here at CMCL, this experience from our lives came to mind. From that vantage point, here's what stuck out to me as I studied and reflected on this story from Genesis.

First off, the action starts with God. *"The LORD appeared to Abraham as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day." (18:1, NRSV)*. We don't know if Abraham was meditating or just napping in the heat. Was he praying to God as he sat there or

simply bored out of his mind and just trying to catch a breeze? All we know is that the LORD appeared and it is then that things start to happen.

This part of the story reminds me that it is the Spirit of God who is prompting us whenever we act in ways that join God's desire to bring justice, peace, and healing to the world. In my own experience, I've sensed God's presence when consciously reaching for God alone in contemplative prayer, and also, unexpectedly and right in the anxious middle of a chaotic hospital emergency room jammed full of people. I believe that God chooses to appear to us in many ways: a surprising interaction in a fast food restaurant, a quiet resolve to continue to seek reconciliation, a moment of heartfelt compassion for someone else.

When God appears, the question is what do we do in response?

### ***A whole-hearted response***

In this morning's story, after God appears to him, Abraham looks up, sees three visitors, and immediately runs to meet them - bowing down to the ground with respect and welcome. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, then proceed to model a whole-hearted response to God's initiative! They don't take their time either. They *hasten* to respond - offering water to wash dusty tired feet, inviting their guests to rest in the shade, preparing a meal with their best ingredients. (I can easily imagine mouth-watering smells wafting towards their guests as Abraham and Sarah roast a choice cut of meat and rush around the tent as they measure, knead, and bake naan-like tandoor bread [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tandoor\\_bread](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tandoor_bread). The scene in my head reminds me of Dave in the kitchen - burners on high, pots boiling, and knives flashing! You know the food is going to be great, but you best stay out of his way. 😊

As described, the feast Abraham and Sarah prepare for their guests is lavish - as if for dignitaries or long-lost friends or family members. Then comes the part that is most interesting to me.

After feasting, the visitors become part of the story in a whole new way. No longer do they simply play a passive role in which they sit there and say little, only receiving hospitality. Their spokesperson starts a conversation of real depth, promising to stay in relationship, and offering Abraham and Sarah a wholly unexpected word of hope: "I will surely return to you in due season and you will have a son."

As we find out later in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah do indeed have a son - a delight to them, of course; but also part of God's bigger plan - as described in Genesis 12:3 - to bless all the families of the earth.

It turns out that the strangers we welcome at God's initiative often come bearing unexpected gifts that bless us. Sometimes, these gifts also take us beyond the joys

and the pain of our own stories, helping us to become an even fuller part of God's big reconciling story for the world.

### ***Welcome and hope in our family's story***

After finding no Mennonite churches in Lubbock, Texas, we googled "welcoming and affirming churches" and were pleased to learn that there were four – and one was right around the corner from our kids' new place.

While in town helping them move in, Dave and I visited St. John's UMC. Pastor Kevin hastened to welcome us - strangers in what felt to us like a hot desert in every way - extending the offer of their congregation's hospitality to our adult children before they even appeared on the doorstep.

After settling in, our son visited, liked the congregation, and joined. We were also delighted that our German daughter-in-law was introduced to a kind of Christian church in the U.S. that is quite different than what the media usually covers.

St. John's welcome to our family has meant so very much to me and Dave! When the Supreme Court upheld same sex marriage, they threw a party to celebrate this momentous decision! St. John's has been there for our son's transitioning journey, as well.

Meanwhile, he brings his gifts of energy, faith, compassion, and humor to the congregation. And through their work as German professors, both he and our daughter-in-law help expand the worlds of young people in that community and teach them to think critically in their own context. They challenge students with questions like: *How do we see ourselves in the world and how can we best interact with those who see themselves very differently? What led up to the Holocaust and how do we avoid repeating the horrors of this chapter of human history?* In this way, by extension, it seems to me that St. John's is now part of God's reconciling work in the world in ways that they likely never imagined.

### ***What does hastening to welcome the stranger look like for us at CMCL?***

On Pride Sunday, what does washing dusty tired feet and preparing a feast for new visitors look like? And how might being more welcoming of people in the LGBTQ community also challenge us to more warmly welcome others?

I'm convinced that our lived experiences of being the unwelcome ones in other settings can help us better understand the importance of welcoming all. There was a time when my own anxiety and grief as a parent took up all the space in my heart and mind. Over time, I began to understand the way it could meet the suffering of others, and that God wanted to meet me there.

This week, I came across a poem by Jennifer Sturgis that says it much more beautifully than I can:

*I take sorrow into me like an expectant mother.*

*I hold it gently, letting it rest in me. It cries itself to sleep.  
When it wakes I let it wail, not asking it to be calm.  
I create a safe space around it and never say, "hush now."  
I begin to understand that this sorrow is bigger than me.  
I am grieving for something greater than myself.  
The pain of the world passes through me.  
As I give it space,  
    it begins a transformation  
    into beauty,  
    into kindness,  
    into peace.*

- Jennifer Sturgis, *Alive Now*

How might God take our suffering and that of others and transform them into beauty, kindness, and peace? Where is God appearing to us these days here on Orange Street in Lancaster? How might we also hasten to respond with a better welcome for those facing racism, classism, and poverty? Those struggling with mental health or physical disabilities?

We're starting to look ahead to the coming years and grapple with questions like these about who CMCL feels drawn to be in this community and what we feel called to do together. The pastors and council members want to hear your thoughts on this. As noted in the bulletin, some of us will be downstairs in the Parrot Gallery today at 11 a.m. to talk with anyone who'd like to stop by.

***Let the feasting begin!***

I'm encouraged and grateful that we're not alone as we find our way. More and more Christian congregations across the country also want to be more welcoming to people in the LGBTQ community and to all!

In Atlantic Coast Conference, the Mennonite Church USA conference that CMCL belongs to, three other congregations already seek to be welcoming in the broadest sense. These include:

- North Baltimore Mennonite - <https://www.bmoremenno.org/>
- Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship - <https://manhattanmennonite.org/>
- Mennonite Congregation of Boston - <https://mennonitecongregationofboston.org/>

I really enjoyed visiting the websites of these congregations recently and I'll include their addresses in the written version of this sermon if you'd like to check them out. We can learn from one another.

This morning's story from Genesis reminds us that God has a way of appearing in unlikely places and unexpected ways. If we want to, we can always jump in and be part of God's big *shalom* story. May we, like Abraham and Sarah, hasten to respond

with welcome to any visitor. And may we also be ready and open to receive the gifts that those who come to our doors will bring with them – so that, together, we may better proclaim the truth that all are known and loved by God.

I'm hungry. Aren't you? Let the feasting begin!