

Royal Oaks

“Sit under the oaks.”

Genesis 18:1-8

Rev. John H. Hice
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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

From Royal Oaks with Love

Down the hill from where I worked, a contingent of our group was measuring, digging and hauling large rocks. By the sweat of their brows they created a spirit fire ring for the Native Church.

Others were spreading mulch with shovels and rakes. It was early football training as they swung pick axes and shovels to dig trenches: one in which to lay rocks for the shape of the garden; the other to conduit for a watering system. By the sweat of our brow, we created a garden in the shape of an eagle.

Later, some went down to a hillside spring used for baptisms. It was in awful disrepair. Our team went to work: resetting bricks, cleaning out sludge, rerouting water and lining the pool with gravel. The result was a work of art. By the sweat of their brows they made it to look like the place it was: a sacred site.

A spirit fire circle, a garden, a baptismal pool: youth and adults were not just a work group working. And the people of Day Spring Church understood what this was about.

The efforts of our Royal Oak group accomplished change. The results were functional; they could be put to good use. But more than useful, they were beautiful. The humble presence and efforts of a bunch of kids and a few adults mostly of European descent did much to heal cultural wounds caused by 500 years of oppression and prejudice.¹

The trip to East Peoria itself, the act of entering into relationship – church-to-church and person-to-person, and the material and effort made were *gifts. Gifts that blessed.*

The Day Spring people loved us though they never got our name just right. They still call us “the group from Royal Oaks.”

Under the Oaks

Royal Oaks. Old Abraham sat under the Oaks of Mamre when three strangers appeared. He didn't know what the readers would already know: that the three were really God and two angels. To him they were just strangers on a long journey.²

Yet their very appearance triggered something in Abraham. He sprang to his feet and ran to them, offering them his hospitality: a little water, a little pedicure, a little bit of bread, a little rest. Then he gave his orders: the best of everything, beyond what he offered –fresh cuts of prime rib and filet mignon broiled to order; whole wheat bread right out of the oven; his personal attention and company on their way. (I guess we don't hear about the crème brulee for desert).

This: before it dawned on Abraham that these strangers were divine: God right there under the Royal Oaks of Mamre.

Sometimes gifts come to us like food that's been set on a banquet table. Gifts turn out to be blessings like food, after all. They fill you with goodness. Maybe later next month you'll look at a banquet table with turkey and all the fixings, and you'll see them for what they represent.

Abraham gave his banquet. Jesus gave his: gifts of bread and wine that turn out to be for us the very presence of Jesus among within us.

Every time you give a gift; every time you get one: it's a banquet.

It will fill you up with goodness.

Those who don't know they've ever been given anything aren't likely to understand. So they withhold and take and tear down. Scarcity does that.

Those who know they have been gifted are different. It seems they're inclined to give. They're inclined to build up.

Like Abraham under the Oaks. And like our group from *Royal Oaks*.

Gifts ever comes from a sense of abundance, a grateful spirit, and opportunity. That's the reality of blessing.

Giving and Receiving

Morning is the time we worked the hardest. It was hot in Peoria. The sun bore down harder as it rose in the sky. Humidity climbed. Outside it sapped our strength.

If sacrifice is giving something up: this was sacrifice. Actually, it felt good.

All the while there was activity inside the church. Indian hands worked in the kitchen. So when the lunch call sounded, pick axes and shovels dropped. Hands were washed. A circle formed around a fire circle for the first sacred story to be told at the new, sacred site.

Then we all gathered inside where the banquet was spread. We broke fry bread and ate food: some familiar to us, some familiar to the peoples who had been living in the land long before us.

A Day Spring member played the Indian flute. New friendships were nurtured; old friendships grew. These were gifts *we received*.

They, too, were blessings. Blessings: back-and-forth and all around.

Abraham and Sarah gave to the strangers. The strangers gave Abraham and Sarah. Blessings: back-and-forth; blessings all around.

When gifts are given, it becomes an exchange and becomes difficult to identify who, finally, is the *blessor* and who, finally, is the *blessee*.

I guess everybody becomes both. "We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our gifts...: another church membership promise that's actually about something you get if you do it.

Giving and receiving, receiving and giving: this could become a world-wide thing. Like today, when the Lord's Table is set for Christians the world over for World Communion Sunday.

What if this table were a sign of something that's happening? What if being church was about giving: not because it's a rule, but because you have the means and the opportunity?

You've received, you've got something to give, and you've got the opportunity. Under those conditions, giving is a blast.

That's what happened under the Oaks of Mamre.

That's what happened to the group from Royal Oaks.

¹ John H. Hice, *Splash*. Sermon preached July 17, 2011. p 5.

² Terrence E. Fretheim, "the Book of Genesis" *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, vol. I. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1994. pp 462-463. cf. *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* annotation. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 2003. p 36.