

“Welcomed as Christ”
Psalm 13:1-6

Pastor Mark McDaniel
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What do you think of when you hear the word “hospitality”? It makes me think of someone who always makes you feel welcome. Someone who always prepares a little extra at each meal, just in case an unexpected guest shows up. Someone who doesn’t let you leave the dinner table without offering you an extra helping of blackberry cobbler. I would guess that we all know someone like that.

I had a friend whose grandparents lived near me. We would often go to visit them. They were from Greece, and the grandmother spoke very little English, but the grandfather could speak some English, so he was able to do some translating for us. The thing I remember most about them, was that they always had several bowls of snacks on the coffee table in the living room – pretzels, potato chips, candy, homemade Baklava, and some other Greek delicacies that I never could pronounce. One of the English words that the grandmother knew very well was “EAT!” And, if I didn’t eat what was on the coffee table, she would go into the kitchen to prepare something else for me.

The problem was, they never replaced what was in each of the bowls. It was just left there until it was gone, and then it was refilled. Not much of a problem for the candy, but the pretzels and chips would get pretty stale and chewy after a while. Even as an 8-year-old I knew it was rude to refuse her hospitality, and I didn’t want her to get up and make me something else, so I would choke down the chips and pretzels, smile, and thank her for the treats.

Now, we find out early in God’s relationship with the wandering tribe of Israel, that showing hospitality toward strangers was important. “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19). According to the Hebrew scriptures, hospitality was not optional. It’s a commandment, just like “Thou shalt not kill.”

The New Testament also seems to place a high value on hospitality. When the religious leaders accused Jesus of “welcoming sinners and eating with them” (Lk 15:2), they were saying that Jesus extended hospitality to the wrong people. When Paul criticized the Church at Corinth for letting the poor go hungry when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, he was accusing them of a breach of hospitality. The author of Hebrews says that hospitality is important because some have “entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2).

Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual writer, was going to a Benedictine monastery for a retreat. The monks observed vows of silence and the retreat was to be meditative and prayerful. Nouwen was delayed and was late getting to the monastery on a miserable, rainy night. He rang the bell, well after bedtime, and was met at the door by one of the brothers. The brother warmly greeted him, took his wet coat, brought him to the kitchen and made him a cup of tea. They chatted into the late-night hours and Nouwen began to relax and feel ready for the retreat. But he knew this monk was supposed to observe silence, so he finally asked him, "Why are

you willing to sit and talk with me?" The monk replied, "Of all the duties of the Christian faith and the rules of my order, none is higher than hospitality."

In today's gospel reading, Jesus extols hospitality four times: "Whoever receives you, receives me; whoever receives a prophet, will receive a prophet's reward; whoever receives a righteous person, will receive the reward of the righteous, and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to a little one will be rewarded."

Just prior to today's gospel reading, Jesus sent out the Twelve to do the works they had seen him do – proclaim the nearness of God's Kingdom, heal the sick, and cast out demons. He sent them out with only the essentials – no money, no bag, no change of clothes. They were entirely at the mercy of the hospitality of others.

In the Old Testament, we hear God's commandment to extend hospitality. In the teachings of Jesus, we hear the directive to accept hospitality. It is probably a message we should take seriously.

The Bible commands hospitality because of the vulnerability of the stranger. In the ancient world, the stranger was just as defenseless and disparaged as the widow or orphan. When the Bible speaks of widows and orphans, it often speaks of the stranger, too. Travelers who were miles away from their homes had no claim on the protection or hospitality of those among whom they traveled. The Bible's command to show hospitality to strangers is part of the essence of justice. The essence of justice is to care for those who have no right to expect our kindness and hospitality. In other words, we are to behave toward others as God has behaved toward us: compassionate toward those who have no entitlement to our compassion.

It goes without saying that extending hospitality to strangers makes us vulnerable. When we open our homes to others, especially strangers, but even friends, we open ourselves up to criticism and the judgment of others; it may even expose us to crime. So, we isolate ourselves behind the walls of our houses; within gated communities; behind fences and security systems. We isolate ourselves in front of our televisions and computer monitors, not letting anyone penetrate our inner sanctum – not the stranger on the corner, not the friend down the street, not even God. In a nutshell, the failure to be hospitable is a failure of faith.

Pastor Bob Edmunds shares what it feels like to be denied hospitality: He and his family were vacationing one summer and decided to worship at a prominent church in the Washington D. C. area. Apparently, this church had quite a reputation for the quality of their preaching and corporate worship. The reputation held up. The sermon was riveting and the music, inspiring. That much did not disappoint them. But the lack of hospitality did.

From the moment they arrived at that church to the time they left, not one person spoke to them - except for the pastor who made a feeble attempt on their way out the door. No one directed them to the nursery. They had to find it themselves. No one invited them to the fellowship hall for coffee and refreshments afterwards. They had to find it themselves. In fact, Bob deliberately stood underneath the huge chandelier in the center of that spacious hall for at least five minutes

- gazing up at it and looking as conspicuous as possible. But no one came up to him or introduced themselves to him.

"We felt as though we were invisible," Bob says. "No one noticed that we were even there. I don't care how good the preaching and music were. Nothing could have made up for their lack of hospitality. That church was as cold and lifeless as a corpse."

Many churches believe that they are friendly and welcoming, but if they had the opportunity to speak to first-time visitors, they may hear a different story. Did you know that most first-time visitors will make the decision whether or not to return within the first ten minutes of their visit?

The church is in the hospitality business. Though our ultimate purpose is spiritual, one of our first steps needs to be attention to hospitality. Church members can extend hospitality to guests by offering to sit with them during the church service, giving them a tour of the church facilities, inviting them to lunch after the service, or connecting with them later in the week.

In Outlive Your Life, Max Lucado writes: Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: "You matter to me and to God." You may think you are saying, "Come on in for a visit." But what your guest hears is, "I'm worth the effort."

The compelling promise that Jesus makes to those who show hospitality is that if they open themselves up to those with no claim on their compassion and kindness, they will be opening themselves to God. Every single one of us needs God's hospitality. God shows us what hospitality is all about by receiving those who have no claim on divine love, like us, and by inviting every single one of us to sit down at the heavenly banquet. AMEN