

“FRUITFUL: Radical Hospitality”

Genesis 18:1-16 • Romans 12:1-13

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This past week I was listening to an audiobook on church leadership by Eric Geiger and he said something that really stuck with me. His challenging question was this: “Do you consider yourself an owner of your church’s mission or are you merely renting it? Are you coming to receive whatever services the church offers or are you actively participating in the mission?” The example he used is the way you take care of a rental car compared to the way you take care of your own car. Nobody ever washes a rental car.

Honestly, most of the book has not been very helpful but this question really kind of stuck in my head. So let me ask you the question. Do you see yourself as an owner of your church and the mission God has given us or are you more like a customer? Well don’t answer yet. This morning we are starting a series called “Fruitful,” based on a book by Robert Schnase, a Methodist bishop down in the Rio Grande Valley. In his book, Schnase says there are five practices that fruitful congregations engage in to carry out the mission of making disciples of Jesus. The five practices are: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. Today we are going to talk about radical hospitality.

When you hear the word “hospitality,” what image does that bring to mind? Is it staying in a hotel? We now call that the “hospitality industry.” Maybe you think of Martha Stewart, who has been called “queen” of hospitality, with her perfect place-settings and creative center pieces. You can picture the elaborately set table, just waiting for some dinner party. But as we look at what the Bible says about Christian Hospitality, we find that Martha Stewart didn’t invent hospitality and she hasn’t even perfected it. In fact, I suspect that if you showed up uninvited at her mansion near Bar Harbor,

Maine, it wouldn’t be hospitality that you would experience.

But Christian hospitality is much more than fine china and table cloths. According to the Bible, hospitality is not some set of actions, like preparing a meal or setting the table a certain way. Hospitality, according to both the Old and New Testaments, is a way of life and it flows from understanding God’s hospitality toward us. That’s why it’s called “radical hospitality.” The word radical sometimes can mean crazy but it really refers to the root of something. Radical hospitality means it’s at the root of how we interact with other people. It means you welcome others into your life as Christ has welcomed you. Schnase says that radical hospitality is a level of hospitality that exceeds all expectations.

Our reading from Romans 12 mentions some of the marks of a true Christian. Paul basically says this: “let your love be authentic. Hate evil, but hold on to what is good. Love each another like family. Outdo one another in showing honor. Don’t be lazy but have real passion for serving God. Be patient when you have problems, and pray a lot. Rejoice in hope.” And then he says, “help take care of the other church members and *seek to show hospitality.*” What does it mean to show hospitality and is it really that important? I think a better translation of the original Greek would be to pursue, to “run after” loving strangers.

A great example of this kind of hospitality is found in our passage from Genesis 18. We find Abraham sitting in the door of his tent during the afternoon heat when he sees three men. He jumps up and runs out to meet them, begging them to stop and spend some time with him. When the strangers agree to stop, Abraham runs to Sarah and has her make some fresh bread while he fixes these strangers Veal Parmesan. Then when it was time for the strangers to leave,

Abraham walks with them for a ways to “set them on their way.”

What we learn is that these strangers that Abraham was welcoming were actually angels, messengers from God. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Over and over again in the Old Testament, particularly in the Law, we find God commanding the Israelites to remember what it was like to be aliens or strangers in Egypt.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul shows us that this idea of being foreigners is a spiritual concept, not just physical. Ephesians 2:12 says, “remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

This helps us to understand biblical hospitality. The way we practice true hospitality will be the result of how we understand God’s hospitality towards us. Because of sin, we are separated from God. We are strangers or foreigners. But because of Jesus, God welcomes us and treats us far better than we deserve.

So let me share with you what I think are four key concepts of biblical hospitality and some practical ways that we can pursue Christian Hospitality in our own lives. First, Christian hospitality, as given to us in the Bible, is a sacred *process* of welcoming outsiders into our life and changing them from strangers into guests and from guests to family.

Hospitality is the way that we invite people into our lives so that they can experience Jesus for themselves and hopefully be transformed into followers of Christ. When we invite them into our homes, we are inviting them to see Christianity in action. By inviting them to church, we are inviting them into our fellowship, our family, so that they will be exposed to the Word of God and discover for themselves their

need for a relationship with the savior. The improvements we are making to our facilities here are not exactly hospitality but they DO eliminate some of the barriers that existed to practicing hospitality. The refreshments we enjoy after worship are not the real hospitality but they give us an opportunity to meet people and begin the process of welcoming them into our lives.

Second, hospitality is not some specialized spiritual gift that only some people possess. Instead, every Christian is called to the ministry of hospitality. In 1 Peter 4:9 we’re told to show hospitality without complaining and as we saw in Romans 12:13, we are to be diligent in welcoming people and showing hospitality. When Paul tells lists the requirements for church leaders in his letters to Timothy and Titus, he says that an elder should be hospitable. Remember, though, that the requirements for elders and deacons are really what Jesus expects from every one of his followers, not just the leaders.

The third key concept of biblical hospitality is that there is an important moral component to it. By addressing the physical needs of others, such as food, shelter and protection, we are actually affirming their value. Christian hospitality is really a subversive act that erases societal barriers such as gender, race, economic condition. Christian hospitality could be the answer to other crises in our society, like loneliness, isolation, and the devaluing of human life. Real hospitality requires us to be involved in people’s lives and that they be involved in ours. That can be messy, but it’s worth it.

And fourth, Christian hospitality cannot be separated from the coming of God’s Kingdom, both now and at the end of history. In Jesus Christ, we are invited to participate in the Kingdom of God, which the Bible frequently describes in terms of a feast or banquet with God himself as the generous host. We are reminded of that when we come to the Lord’s Table to take communion. Jesus is the one who invites us to participate, pointing us to his great heavenly

banquet. We learn to practice hospitality by experiencing it here first.

So what about you? How can you practice biblical hospitality in your own life? First of all, you can begin right here today. Meet someone here you don't know. This may be their first time in our church or they may have been members for fifty years. But if you don't know them, they are strangers to you. Introduce yourself. Invite them to join you for lunch. Begin the process of turning strangers into family.

Second, as Christians, we should be welcoming "strangers" into our homes and lives. Does that mean opening our homes to our friends and family is not hospitality? Actually, by strangers we mean people who are strangers from God. All of us, in fact, have very close family or friends who are far from God. Remember, the goal of hospitality is to expose them to Christ through our own lives.

You can get involved in or start a new small discipleship group. These are small groups of 3 or 4 people studying the Bible every day for a few minutes and then meeting together once a week to discuss what they are learning from their study and to discuss where they see God at work. Inviting people into this kind of close friendship is radical hospitality.

Also, look for ways to get to know your neighbors, the staff at your doctor's office, the

employees at the grocery store. By intentionally building a relationship with the people you come in contact with on a regular basis, you are practicing hospitality and working to eliminate loneliness.

Third, food is an important part of hospitality. Look for ways to share meals with people, whether at a restaurant or in your home. When you eat with people there is a kind of bond that is created and it sends the message that you value the other person.

Finally, invite people to experience the fellowship of our congregation. When guests visit our church, make an effort to make them feel welcome and find ways to help them get connected by building relationships.

I think the best way to describe hospitality is summed up by the saying on a napkin holder my grandmother had when I was growing up. It said, "We're happy to share with you such as we've got, the leaks in the roof and the soup in the pot." Unlike Martha Stewart's view of hospitality, biblical hospitality isn't about having the nicest table setting, it's about having people with you around the table. It's about sharing what you've got, whatever it is. It's about sharing your life. And it's about sharing the Kingdom of God with people who need it most. That's radical.

Amen.