

Beyond The Door of Hospitality

John 12:1-8

Hebrews 13:1-3

February 29, 2004

Two strangers attended the same church for several Sundays. No one spoke to either one of them, so one lady decided, "I'll give this church one more chance. If nobody speaks to me next Sunday I'll never go again." The other lady said, "I don't like this 'no speak' situation in church. If no one speaks to me next Sunday, I'll break the ice and speak to someone myself." The next Sunday the ushers happened to seat the two strangers on the same pew. Once more nobody spoke. But, as the first woman rose to stalk out forever, the second woman turned, put out her hand and said, "Good morning, I'm glad to see you." Both were pleased at having met a friend and they continued to attend.

The Bible says, "*Do no forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels unaware.*" I would like to talk about that today.

Hospitality is more than a tea party for friends, a suite at a business convention, an association of restaurant and hotel owners, or even a committee of greeters at church. Hospitality is a spiritual discipline and a moral obligation of all who call themselves Christian. It is considered as important in the Bible as prayer, Bible study and worship. It is a dynamic expression of vibrant Christianity. We are called to practice hospitality, to be hospitable, to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Come today and let us take a closer look.

HOSPITALITY IS AN ATMOSPHERE. It is in the air; it is a feeling that you have when you gather in a certain place to worship God. We live in a house of fear. We put dogs in our yards and double locks on our doors. We install elaborate alarms on our cars and throughout our houses. We surround our airports with safety officials, our cities with armed police and our country with the omnipresent military. We train our children to beware of strangers. We are reluctant to stop and help a stranded motorist. We prefer to communicate by cell phone and the internet rather than entering into a conversation with an individual. It just seems much safer that way. The risk of face-to-face encounters are just too much.

There is a need to be smart. Perverts and predators are no respecters of persons. The more we accumulate, the more we stand the risk of being robbed. The less we know the people around us, the less we trust and the more we fear. The media and the movies seem intent to heightening that fear to astronomical proportions. How much fear can we endure and still function as loving creative human beings? Has fear frozen us from freedom, imprisoned us in isolation, destined us to live anxious lives on adrenalin alert? What is the long term effect of living in that kind of anxiety? What will happen to the human community when we continue to isolate ourselves from one another, separate ourselves from community and

live out of fear of other human beings?

The Church is called to create a safe place where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, lay aside their occupations and preoccupations, and to listen, with love, to one another and God.

In the Bible, strangers were considered messengers of God. Abraham received three strangers at Mamre, offering them water, bread, some fine tender beef, and they revealed themselves as messengers of God. They came with news that Abraham and Sarah were to bear a son in their old age and name him Isaac. When the widow of Zarephath offered food and shelter to Elijah, he revealed himself as a man of God even capable of raising her dead son.

When the two travelers to Emmaus invited the stranger who had joined them on the road to spend the night, he made himself known to them in the breaking of bread as the Risen Christ. *“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some have entertained angels unaware.”*

It is the mission of the Church to bring people together who do not know one another. I consider one of my most vital ministries on Sunday to be that of hugging children. I want children to know that there is at least one old man who can be trusted. Of course, I get a lot more out of that than they do. They have prayed on my behalf and made me pictures for months. One threw his arms around me last Sunday and said, “I’m glad your cancer is gone.” Now that is healing in every way. *“Let the children come and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God.”* Hospitality is an atmosphere. It is a feeling that you create in a place.

When Thomas Jefferson was President, he and his entourage came to a river on horseback. Standing on the bank was a man who approached Jefferson and asked for a ride. Jefferson gave him a lift onto the horse and they crossed safely to the other side. Upon dismounting, several assistants criticized the man for asking the President for a ride. “Look,” replied the man, “I didn’t know he was the President of the United States. I just know some people have a **yes** face and some have a **no** face. The President’s face said **yes** so I asked him for a ride.” From the parking lot to the pew, I want to build a congregation full of **yes** faces, those who welcome others into our midst. We cannot change people any more than we can make a plant grow, but we can take away the weeds and stones which prevent development and join hands as God makes his will known to us all.

Hospitality is an atmosphere and no one can create it in a community of faith except you. I am asking you today to create an atmosphere of hospitality that we may work against the fears that have become a part of the culture of our day and create a safe place where strangers may come and be known. Will you join me in that ministry?

HOSPITALITY IS AN ATTITUDE. It is an attitude of the heart. In the gospel

lesson today, Jesus is the guest of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at a dinner given in his honor. Jesus restored Lazarus to life and the family is grateful. Martha prepared the meal. Lazarus entertained the guest of honor. Mary took the family inheritance of perfume reserved for special occasions and poured the whole bottle onto Jesus' feet wiping his feet with her hair. And the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Gratitude has no boundaries; it is spontaneous, extravagant and good.

There was a problem in this setting; the disciples were there. Judas has an attitude. He criticizes the act as going too far. Trying to hide behind concern for the poor, he reveals his self-centeredness that has him stealing from the treasury. Jesus calls his hand. *"Leave her alone,"* said Jesus, *"The perfume is appropriate for the day of my burial."*

There are some things that you do out of gratitude. Hospitality rises from an attitude of gratitude about life. Our practice of hospitality is always in response to God's gracious offering of hospitality to us. When we are overwhelmed by the power of God's grace in our lives, then we are set free to share with those who are around us; and how can we do otherwise?

In Deuteronomy 24:17-18, Moses instructs the children of Israel not to deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of a widow as a pledge. He says, *"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there."* When you have been there in that position, in that situation, and someone has come to help you, you won't soon forget what has happened in your midst. Only when we know how to behave as guests will we have the honor to act as hosts.

What are the attitudes of your heart that limit your hospitality to others? My wife is a much better Christian than I am. I talk about religion; she practices it. She puts her faith into action. She recently volunteered in a program from this church at the prison called Better Decisions. She visits the prison once a week and has a person with whom she relates in a personal way. After one meeting with her care-receiver she came home and said, "I've got to deal with my prejudices toward prisoners before I can deal one-on-one with this individual." What are the attitudes of your life that are going to have to change if you are going to have an attitude of gratitude toward others?

A charter member of a church I once served asked a young couple not to return to church because their child misbehaved in the service. After I apologized to the couple I invited this elderly, single woman to my office for an explanation. "I can't help it," she lamented, "I've never been around children and they get on my nerves." I suggested she sit elsewhere. She decided it was better for her not to attend at all and she didn't for several months. What are the attitudes in your life that would have to change in order for you to become a person of gratefulness who is open and responsive to other people?

Adele Gonzales gave up a nice home in Cuba with well-to-do parents, a brother, two aunts and a grandmother to come to America for an education. “I immediately felt this strong sense of being different and not belonging,” writes Adele. “I even had a college classmate ask me, ‘Is it hard for you to get used to wearing clothes? Don’t you all dress like Tarzan and Jane in the jungle?’” What attitudes are going to have to change if we are going to accept people who happen to be different?

When we have lived for a while, the walls of our lives become marked by many events—world events, family events, personal events, as well as by our responses to them. Hospitality invites us to break down the walls of prejudice that encourages us to see others as inferior, different, dangerous, unworthy of our time. What attitudes would have to change in order for you to embrace another? Hospitality is the virtue that allows us to break through the narrowness of our fears and open our lives to the rich influence of others. Hospitality is an attitude of the heart and I am pitching for a change in your life and mine.

HOSPITALITY IS AN ACTION. It is love in action. It doesn’t have to be organized or programmed or formulated. Hospitality is expressed in random acts of kindness. That is why we have asked you in these forty days of discipline to work daily toward one random act of kindness. I went to pay for my lunch the other day at the City Café and it was already paid for. My kind benefactor even left me two dollars in change. I don’t know the giver so I can’t reciprocate. I am a debtor to some kind person of the universe who on that particular day decided to do a kind act, a random act of kindness on behalf of somebody else.

A young mother in her old Honda loaded down with children pays for the next five cars at the turnpike toll booth. Can you imagine what those motorists thought when they drove up and the attendant at the toll booth said, “It’s a free ride today, the lady in front of you just performed a random act of kindness”?

A teenager was seen out scrubbing graffiti off a park bench on campus implanted there in days gone by. A homebound lady writes five notes a day to friends, acquaintances, and strangers extending acts of kindness and love to people she does not even know.

Love does not call for as much organization, structure, programming and planning as we would like to think. We need to just do it. That is hospitality; just create the space and get the attention to just do it.

Hospitality is characteristic of community. In I Peter 4:9 we read, “*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*” If we cannot love the people we know, how can we think about loving strangers?

When fallen TV evangelist Jim Baker was released from prison, he got a call from Ruth and Billy Graham. They helped him find a place to live and invited him to worship with them at Montreat Presbyterian Church the following Sunday. “I

had been out of prison less than forty-eight hours and there I sat next to Ruth Graham as she announced to the world that I was still her friend,” said the humbled evangelist. “They invited me up to their cabin for lunch and began to help restore my soul.” Are we going to help one another in the community?

The Bible is full of one anothering, love one another, pray for one another, care for one another, bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Hospitality is expanded into the neighborhood. Dr. Bob Goodrich was pastor of First United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas when President Kennedy was shot. With tears in his eyes the following Sunday, he lamented to his congregation, “Lee Harvey Oswald lived only three blocks from our church, but so far as we know no one from our congregation ever called on him, or invited him to church, or expressed any interest at all in him during that time. Do we have any responsibility for what has just happened in our world?”

If we want a safer, more hospitable world, we might begin by building hospitality centers that are known as churches who are as concerned for their community as they are for themselves. Look all around you and find someone in need. Help somebody today. Though it be little, a neighborly deed, help somebody today. Isn’t it time we put the moral punch back into that Biblical word called **HOSPITALITY?**

Amen.

