

Caring for People Through Practicing Hospitality

I want you to see something in our Scripture passage from Hebrews 12-13. Hebrews 12:28-13:2 say, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.' Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

Notice how the verses that talk about worshiping God are immediately followed by the command to love one another, which is followed immediately by the command to entertain or show hospitality to strangers. Here once again we find a confirmation of our calling and our mission to love God and care for people. The two things are inseparable: Authentic worship will incline our hearts to care for people.

Last Sunday we talked about caring for people through praying for them; this morning I want to talk about caring for people by practicing hospitality toward them. Hospitality is defined in my dictionary as: "Cordial and generous reception of or disposition toward guests." The word "cordial" means, "Warm and sincere; friendly," and "Serving to invigorate, or stimulating." We have had a perfect example of hospitality occur in our church family recently. Bud and Ruth Mitchell live in a duplex home on Creekside Drive. The other half of their duplex was recently filled by the Gallagher family. This makes for an interesting combination.

Bud and Ruth are senior citizens--young at heart to be sure--but seniors nonetheless. The Gallaghers are a young family with four lively children. Many other older couples in Bud and Ruth's situation would have been resentful of a young family with small children moving in next to them. They would have seen it as a threat to their domestic tranquility, would have worried about possible property damage, would have been fearful for their own safety. Bud and Ruth, however, welcomed the Gallaghers with open arms and with an invitation to dinner. The Gallaghers soon reciprocated. A friendship was born. Bud and Ruth invited Garrett and Katrina and their children to come with them to church. We are blessed to have the Gallaghers with us again this morning because Bud and Ruth practiced hospitality toward them.

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And, of course, it didn't stop there. When Garrett and Katrina and their family came to our church, they experienced many other people here who were warm, sincere, and friendly. They have felt welcomed, and in about a month are already feeling at home among us. One important way in which our church has grown in the past and will grow in the future is through the awesome power of hospitality.

I get a kick out of the Geico Insurance commercials that are being run on Television. They have a series of commercials in which an "actor" is brought in to help ordinary people dramatize their stories of how Geico has helped them. In one commercial two men are sitting on the edge of a swimming pool with their pant legs hiked up and their bare feet dangling in the pool. James Lipton, who interviews actors, is telling the story. Perhaps you have seen it?

The key phrase for me in this commercial is composed of the words: "human beings behaving humanly; brilliant." Can you dare to imagine what would happen if even a simple majority of Christian people in all the churches of the world would begin to behave "Christianly" toward their neighbors? It truly would be brilliant. Can you imagine what would happen if even half of us began to reach out to our neighbors like Bud and Ruth reached out to theirs? Our biggest problem would be what to do with all the people.

You see, there may not be that many people in our community who are actively looking for a church, but I would suggest to you this morning that there are multitudes of people looking for the basic elements of hospitality. There are many people longing for other people to express acceptance and care for them, to be warm and friendly toward them, and to sincerely welcome them into their lives. Most people wouldn't know what to call it, but millions of them are waiting and longing for Christians to act "Christianly"--to show them the sincere and genuine love and hospitality of Jesus Christ.

Now what I want us to understand here and take to heart is that caring for people through practicing hospitality toward them is not peripheral to our task as Christians; but, rather, it is our central task and primary occupation. Whereas our ultimate goal is to connect people to Christ and to teach them how to follow Him, the foundational work and by far the more time consuming work is to build relationships. People need to know that we

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authentically care for them, before they will allow us to teach or lead them. So, hospitality will be and must be our forte', our magna opus, the one thing we do best. We need to become specialists in caring for people and loving them into the kingdom.

I don't know if this sounds normal to you or a bit strange, but it should sound normal. Showing hospitality to people has long been central to what the people of God are all about. Listen again to our Scripture from Genesis 12:1-3: "The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This is what we are to be all about: We are to be instruments of the Lord to bless all peoples on earth. We are not just to act humanly; we are to act Christianly, bestowing blessing and acts of hospitality to people wherever and whenever we come into contact with them.

Hospitality is actually a much larger concept than what we traditionally think it to be. It's not just having someone over for a meal or providing shelter for a traveler. In fact, if done with the wrong attitude or for the wrong motive, these may not be hospitality at all. True Christian hospitality begins in the heart. In it's simplest form, we may define Christian hospitality as making room in our hearts for others with a sincere desire to bless them.

But how do we acquire such an aptitude and ability? For some people it seems to come fairly easy. We have a number of people here at Fourth Street who seem to be sort of hard-wired for hospitality. Bill and Diana Bartley, Craig and Patty Yohn, Bud and Ruth Mitchell, Matt and Leann Hornberger, to name several, all have visitors in their homes on a regular basis. I also know that I can show up at those homes unannounced day or night and be welcomed, find sanctuary.

But what about those of us who are not quite so gregarious, who may have trouble reaching out to people beyond our own families or making room for strangers. What about those of us who are not likely to entertain any angels because our hearts are hard, guarded, or fearful? I talked with a man some time ago

about coming to church. He said, “I suppose I could come to church, but if I did I would have to talk to people, and I wouldn’t know what to say.” How does a person like that change and become an agent of blessing in the lives of others?

It seems to me that the path to becoming a person who can show hospitality to and be a blessing to others involves several steps. The first step is to have an encounter with God’s incredible love for us. Several weeks ago, I called your attention to the woman who crashed the dinner party that was going on in the house of Simon the Pharisee. She came because Jesus was there and she came and knelt at his feet. She anointed his feet with perfume, washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Jesus explained her exuberant devotion in contrast with others by saying, “those who are forgiven much love much—those who are forgiven little love little.” I John 4:19 tells us the secret: “We love because he first loved us.”

Christian hospitality begins in us when we begin to realize how much God loves us. Once we get an inkling of how much God has loved, cared for, and forgiven us, our desire to love, care for, forgive, and to bless others will come naturally. **We love and care for others because God has first loved and cared for us.**

A second step to becoming persons who will extend hospitality to others is for God to give us eyes to notice the other people around us and to receive the understanding that these are persons made in God’s image and of such great worth that Jesus died to be their Savior. We need to come to that place in our spiritual lives where we can begin to see ourselves, and others, through the eyes and understanding of Jesus Christ. Jesus looked at little children and saw representatives of the Kingdom of God. I had 5 little children catching lightning bugs in my yard Tuesday evening: welcome to the Kingdom! Jesus looked at the meek and humble and said, “they will inherit the earth.” He looked at a repentant tax collector and pronounced him justified. He looked at Simon and saw Peter, the Rock. He looked at Saul the hate-filled Pharisee and saw his apostleship.

Jesus pushes it even further. In Matthew 25 He makes the extraordinary observation that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” And, “whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” In other words, when I look into the eyes of a fellow human

being, especially one in need, God’s eyes are looking back at me. How can we withhold hospitality from another human being when we know he or she bears the image of our Savior? **We extend hospitality to others because to show hospitality to others is to show hospitality to Christ.**

A third step to becoming people of hospitality and blessing for others is the painful but necessary step of dying to ourselves that we might come to know the joy of living for God and blessing others. The chief thing that characterizes us as sinners is that we have a natural tendency to be all about ourselves. We are by nature, selfish and self-centered. We are all about feeding ourselves, protecting ourselves, promoting ourselves, pleasuring ourselves, worshiping ourselves, and preserving ourselves. This can be true of our church as well. But Jesus comes to forgive us our selfish ways and to give us a new birth that turns us inside out. When we receive Him into our lives as Savior and Lord, He promises to take from us our hearts of stone and to give us hearts of flesh. He promises to put His own Spirit in us and to make us a new creation. **We become agents of hospitality and blessing to others when Jesus puts His Spirit within us.**

Are you ready to become God’s agent of hospitality and blessing this morning? Ask Him to help you understand how much He loves you. Ask Him to give you eyes to see Him in the people around you who need ministry. Ask Him to forgive and take away your selfishness and to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Then ask God to show you an opportunity to extend hospitality and blessing to someone you encounter this week, and do whatever the Spirit leads you to do to bless him or to bless her.

The fourth step to becoming people of hospitality and blessing is to just do it. It can be as simple as a warm smile or as elaborate as a banquet. It can cost very little or demand a lot, but whatever God puts in your heart to do to extend hospitality and to bless others, just do it. Ask Him for eyes to see the opportunity and follow through. **Bless and be blessed. Just do it. Amen.**

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110
4thstcog@pennswoods.net

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**Genesis 12:1-3, Galatians 3:7,
Hebrews 12:28-13:8**

Jon R. Neely, Pastor