

**“A Welcoming Community”**  
**Hebrews 13:1-6**  
**March 24, 2024**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

I’m so thankful to be a part of a church with a core value of being a welcoming community. In our study of the one-another commands of the New Testament, this is one that could be easily overlooked. In comparison to the commands to love one another and forgive one another, this one feels a little second tier. It would be a mistake, however, to relegate this one to honorable mention status. To welcome people, or its related practice of hospitality, turns out to lie at the very heart of the gospel.

I like what Christine Pohl writes in her book on hospitality titled *Making Room*. “Along with thirty other students and seekers, I lived with the families of L’Abri Fellowship in England. It was there that I first saw how much more powerfully the gospel spoke when those who were teaching opened their homes and their lives to strangers—with no pretense, no perfection, but extraordinary faithfulness and generosity. Their hospitality made the Christian life both credible and inviting to many who stayed with them” (p. xi).

We emphasize the importance of this command every week when we gather for worship. In our liturgy, we refer to it as the “Welcome of God” in which we encourage the welcoming of one another as God has welcomed us. This touches the very heart of the gospel, in which those outside God’s blessing because of our sin are welcomed by God into trinitarian fellowship.

There is not just a theological side to this, but a social side as well. Another quote from Christine Pohl is helpful for this. “People view hospitality as quaint and tame partly because they do not understand the power of recognition. When a person who is not valued by society is received by a socially respected person or group as a human being with dignity and worth, small transformations occur... Hospitality can begin a journey toward visibility and respect” (p. 62).

Today we are going to consider one verse from Hebrews. **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”** (13:2). Though the word “welcome” is not used here, the idea is present in this notion of hospitality. It means literally a love of strangers. It is the welcome extended to outsiders by those who are insiders.

**I. Hospitality Commanded**

Hebrews 13 begins the ethical section of this book, a section in which the author gives instruction on the practical life changes that follow from the theological truths he has just explained. Not surprisingly, he begins with the command to love. **“Let brotherly love continue”** (v. 1). The very first aspect of that love that he begins to develop is this area of hospitality. The phrase translated “to show hospitality to strangers” is just one word in the original. It’s a noun that means literally “love of strangers.” It’s a combination of two words, *philos* and *xenos*. *Philos* is one of the Greek words for love, translated in the previous verse as “brotherly love.” It’s the kinship love for family members and those close to us. So it’s a bit striking that it is joined to this word for strangers, *xenos*.

Who are these strangers who are to be welcomed as if they were family members? One answer that is clearly the case is that they are fellow believers who are traveling in service to the gospel. We call them today missionaries. One of the ways the gospel spread in the first century was through the efforts of these traveling evangelists and church planters. Public inns were notoriously unsavory places, so missionaries were usually dependent on the hospitality of fellow Christians. Christians are being told here to make sure they accommodate these traveling missionaries.

Does this verse also command that such a welcome be extended to those outside the church? I think so. Wasn’t the point of Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan that our neighbor is anyone in need? Even more significant is the way the entire Bible speaks of the obligation God’s people have to strangers and foreigners. A key theme of the overarching story of the Old Testament is to show kindness to strangers even as we have been shown kindness by God in our experience of being outsiders. The father of the nation, Abraham, was told to leave his home and go to a land where he would be a foreigner. His grandson, Jacob, took the entire clan to Egypt, where they lived for four hundred years as foreigners. Their experience in Egypt was the basis of an important Old Testament command regarding hospitality. **“You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt”** (Ex. 23:9). Even after Israel finally inherited the promised land, they were said to have a continued identity as foreigners. **“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me”** (Lev. 25:23). When we turn the page to the New Testament, Christians are to remember that we are another type of foreigner, exiles. In his first epistle, Peter addressed his readers as “elect exiles” (1:1). We are exiles because we are currently living outside our natural home, which is as citizens of heaven. In summary, then, we are to show hospitality to strangers because we have firsthand experience of that status ourselves. As God has been kind to us in our identity as foreigners, so we are to show kindness and love to strangers and foreigners.

A central part of hospitality has always been sharing a meal together. This, too, has deep roots in the New Testament. It became part of regular weekly church practice in the early church, as they ate a meal together in conjunction with the observance of the Lord's Supper. In part, these meals were one of the ways the early church cared for the poor. They were also celebrated as a way to look forward to the great marriage supper of the Lamb spoken of in Revelation 19:9. These "love feasts," as they were called, were in contrast to the current cultural practices of that day. Outside the church, elaborate banquets were not uncommon, and they would reinforce social status boundaries. But in the church, these meals had the effect of reflecting the transformation brought about in the kingdom of God. Worldly status distinctions were transformed, and a person's value was not defined by money or class any longer.

Sharing meals together was counter-cultural in the early church, and it remains so today, though for different reasons. In our day, it is counter-cultural simply because it is not common practice for people to be in one another's homes for meals. We live largely isolated lives in which our homes tend to be just private places reserved only for those who live there. But in a nation that is literally dying of loneliness, to open our homes to share a meal with someone else can have a powerfully positive impact. Speaking for Wendy and me, it has been our experience that this positive impact is not limited to those who are guests in our home, but has also been very positive for our children. When they were growing up, if we went a few weeks without having anybody over, our children would begin to ask us when we would host someone again. As they have now grown up and have homes of their own, they have all continued in active hospitality.

By way of application, let me ask a simple question. Are there people outside your family who know what the inside of your home looks like? Some may seek to excuse a lack of hospitality on financial grounds, saying that they just can't afford it. I suppose there are cases where that is true, but I would also add that it doesn't have to be elaborate and expensive. One of our family's funny stories about this stems from a time that Wendy, on the spur of the moment, invited someone for lunch after morning worship. She said, "I've got some beef stew that I can warm up." This couple accepted the invitation, but when Wendy was warming up the stew, she discovered that there was only one piece of beef left. It became a joke with this couple for years after that, in which they would commonly ask if Wendy had anymore of that beefless beef stew.

## **II. Hospitality Neglected**

The author says that this hospitality, this welcome of strangers, is something we ought not to "neglect." It's a word that means literally to forget. So it's more of a passive word, in contrast to stronger words such as "despise"

or “oppose.” There are certain things we can be in favor of but never get around to doing. Wendy can tell you that I’m in favor of cleaning out my closet of clothing I no longer wear, but she would also tell you that I rarely get around to do it. That’s the idea of this word. Few people are going to launch an anti-hospitality campaign, claiming that the greatest problem in the world today is simply too much hospitality. On the other hand, it is something easily neglected simply because it is easy not to see the stranger in our midst. Wendy and I have on occasion visited churches where everyone is so busy visiting with their friends that absolutely no one speaks to us. No one sees us. We are neglected. The author is telling us to make sure this doesn’t happen. He wants us to feel with the stranger the awkwardness and challenge of being that person without relational connections, or perhaps that person who is simply lonely, and to open our arms to welcome such a one.

Let’s be honest about the factors that make it easy to neglect hospitality, and the first one is the fact that strangers are strangers. They are unknown to us and that makes them a little frightening. If we invite them to share a meal with us, we might discover that we have very little to talk about, leading to long and awkward silences in the dinner conversations. Or even worse, perhaps our dinner guests might have a different political view and maybe they like to argue about politics. It is worth pointing out that our political differences today are far more tame than the Jew-Gentile divide of the early church, or for that matter the rich-poor social divide. Yet these differences were in no way to excuse the neglect of hospitality.

Another obstacle to hospitality is simply that it is costly. At the very least, it costs time and effort. To welcome a new person to our church will cost you the opportunity to connect with a friend. To invite someone to your home will often cost money. Visitors may break things in your house. Hospitality, then, is an opportunity to put into practice Romans 12:1, to offer yourself as a living sacrifice.

A third obstacle is the risk that your hospitality will be taken advantage of. Guests might stay too long, eat or drink too much, or bring some other type of harm. It needs to be said here that there is nothing wrong with establishing some boundaries. The early church had to do so. A type of manual for church life known as the *Didache* was written shortly after the book of Hebrews would have been composed, and it included a section on the boundaries needed in the practice of hospitality. For example, it said that anyone who stayed for more than two days or who asked for money was to be dismissed as an impostor and a parasite. Boundaries can actually be helpful in establishing a long-term practice of hospitality, and these boundaries should include personal care.

### **III. Hospitality Rewarded**

The last phrase of the verse contains a promise. We are not to neglect hospitality, **“for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”** It is likely a reference to Abraham’s hospitality to the three men visiting him. He welcomed them and fed them. While awaiting the meal, Abraham talked with his visitors and it gradually dawned on him that these were no mere mortals. Two of them turned out to be angels, while the third was God himself. Abraham received two gifts from this visitation. He received a renewed promise that he would have a son in his old age, and he received a warning about the impending judgment upon Sodom. The point is that hospitality, though it costs us something on the front end, brings blessing from God himself.

We see the same thing in the other biblical accounts of hospitality. Lot received the angelic visitors coming to him in Sodom. He was delivered both from the threats of the men of Sodom against him and from God’s later judgment upon that city. The prophet Elijah was told by God to seek help during a time of drought and famine from a widow who lived in Zarephath, outside Israel. So Elijah was a foreigner to her. The problem was that she was about to run out of food and facing starvation herself. But she agreed to share her last provisions with God’s prophet. As it turned out, Elijah and his God ended up meeting her needs for food during the long duration of this drought and famine. Her flour jar and jug of oil were miraculously refilled every day. When her son took ill and died, Elijah raised him from the dead. A similar thing happened to Elijah’s successor, the prophet Elisha. Another woman provided him shelter. As in the story of Elijah, when her son died, Elisha raised him from the dead.

This verse is promising blessing to us when we take the risk of hospitality. What blessing might we expect? It could be any number of blessings, but there is one that is common. Hospitality connects us to God. Jesus said that when we extend hospitality to others, it is as if we are doing it to him. The parable of the sheep and the goats makes this very clear. It connects us to Jesus also in the fact that Jesus was often the stranger. He was not welcome in the inn at his birth. King Herod tried to kill him, and his family fled to Egypt, living as refugees there. He was homeless during the years of his public ministry. His family thought he was crazy. His disciple abandoned him, and his heavenly Father forsook him at the cross. But this all happened that outsiders like us might be welcomed into the greatest insider club of all, the fellowship of the trinity.

## **CONCLUSION:**

We conclude today with the blessing of sharing a meal hosted by our Lord Jesus, purchased with his own body and blood.