

Practicing Hospitality

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[0:00] So recently, if you are a leader of The Atlantic, a writer named Darren Thompson wrote a piece where he's essentially echoing a growing chorus of voices who are observing a striking shift over the last decade or so in our culture in North America.

And the shift is that there is a massive decline in the number of people who are either attending or willing to host social gatherings. What we're observing, especially if we compare today's numbers back to the 1960s and 70s, is that the practice of hospitality is disappearing.

It's disappearing. And not surprisingly, there was a major uptick in this coming out of the 2020 pandemic. Hospitality has disappeared. At the same time, we see other trends that are on the rise. Loneliness is now such an epidemic that it is seen as a public health crisis because of all the array of mental health challenges that result from loneliness.

It's a major problem in the West. We see our society becoming more and more polarized.

Hyper-polarization. A big reason for that is that more and more people are refusing or really lack opportunity to interact with people outside of their bubble.

[1:34] And so facts themselves about major world events are contained within these bubbles. And so we have quite literally very different versions of reality and people living within those versions of reality.

So the ground feels less and less common. This vulcanizing effect of these bubbles cannot be overstated.

It's fragmenting our society. So these are trends that we observe. And I think if we look at all of that together, it means a lot of things.

But here's what we're going to focus on this morning. I think this means that there is a huge opportunity for the church. A huge opportunity for the church. Hebrews 13, one of our passages this morning, says very clearly, Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, despite whatever trends may be happening in society.

And what we're going to see is that for Christians, the practice of hospitality is not optional.

Hospitality is a spiritual practice. Not much different than reading scripture on a daily basis or a daily prayer or attending worship services together.

[2:56] It is a spiritual practice. In other words, I think that one of the most powerful cultural and world healing things a Christian can say today in the West may simply be this.

You're invited to dinner. And so this is what we're going to look at this morning. We're talking about hospitality as part of a series that we've been doing this fall, looking at the DNA of our church.

What are some of the practices that are central to who we are and what we feel called to in this city? And one of those is that we want to be a people, we feel called to be a community that practices generous hospitality.

So that's what we're going to look at. We're going to look at Hebrews 13 and Deuteronomy 10. And for those of us who are Christians, I hope you leave with a deeper understanding of why hospitality is so important.

If you're here and you're not a Christian, we're delighted that you're here. And we're going to go beyond that. What I hope you see is that hospitality sits at the very center of our faith. It is only because of God's hospitality that any of us are here this morning.

[4:07] So here's where we're going. Hospitality, we're going to see the purpose of it and the principle behind it and the motivation for it. Let's pray. Lord, Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence here with us.

May we be present to you as you are present to us. And just as we read the gospel a moment ago in the midst of the people, now we pray that your word would dwell in the midst of each one of us.

Lord, we're here not to just hear human wisdom, to hear your voice. And more than that, to have your life in us. Lord, we pray that through your word, through this time together, we would encounter you.

That we would receive what we need to do while we pray this. And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So first of all, the purpose of hospitality. People in a place like D.C. hear the word hospitality and immediately encounter certain things to mind.

Things like Martha Stewart, Heinegarten. Expectations of what hospitality actually means, right?

We think of really nice four-day food. We think of getting out to find China.

[5:13] We think of an entire evening where you have to, you know, figure out the time that works for everybody. And then you have to do the dietary restrictions. And then you have to go and plan a menu and buy all the food.

And then you have to clean your house and invite people over. And then you have to clean your house again. And it's a whole thing. So when you say practice hospitality, people immediately say, oh, right? It's so much easier to sit at home and watch Netflix.

It's like free entertainment. Not having lived. This is what we think of when we think of hospitality. In the ancient world, hospitality was a duty and an obligation.

Your reputation and your honor as a family partly depended on your willingness to show hospitality. This is a world where there are no hotels.

So when you needed to travel and you would come into a town, you would just sort of hang out at the gate or go to the well or wherever the gathering place was. And you would just kind of hope that somebody would say, hey, do you need a place to stay?

[6:11] And then there was a whole etiquette, you know, a whole etiquette around hospitality. And if you didn't do it, you would really look down on it, right? So it was a duty and an obligation. God's purpose for hospitality goes way beyond what we think of, and it goes way beyond what people in the ancient world thought.

In Hebrews 13, the author of Hebrews says, keep on loving those at the church. Well, of course, love your brothers and sisters in the church.

But then it keeps going. Also, keep showing hospitality to strangers, right? Don't neglect to do that, okay?

Then it goes further. Continue to care for those who are in prison, okay? And then it keeps going. Continue caring for those who have been mistreated.

So he said, don't just love the people who are like you, who you get along with, who think like you, who are already in your community. But love the people who are not like you.

[7:17] Make sure you love everyone, and especially those who are born. So God's vision for hospitality is inextricably linked to God's vision for a just world.

Justice is in the very center of this. And we see this going back to the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 10, we see some of the most vulnerable people in society listed.

Orphans. I think the fatherless. Widows. And then this word foreigners. And the word foreigners is a very important word in the Bible because foreigners were immigrants.

These were people who had been displaced for whatever reason from their family or their tribe or their ethnic group. And they were living among the Israelites.

But socially, they were outsiders. They didn't have family sometimes. They didn't have land. They didn't have many rights.

[8:19] They didn't have a way to earn an income. And so they were extremely vulnerable. And here's what this is saying. God loves those people.

God loves those people. The most vulnerable. God loves those people. And he calls his people to do the same. And here's the real kicker.

Why should God's people care about these foreigners who aren't even ethnically Israelites? And God says this.

Because you were once in their shoes. You were strangers. You were outsiders in Egypt. But God set you free and formed you into an agent.

So the only reason that you're an insider instead of an outsider is because God created a nation for you and invited you into it. And so now God says, I want you to go and do the same.

[9:22] Love them the way I have loved you. Right? So the first set of implications is this. Biblical hospitality is not just fancy dinner bars.

It can be. But it doesn't have to be. It goes much deeper than that. And it's not just about duty and obligation. Right? We're never going to hang our head and say, well, I know this is something that I should be doing.

That's the way a lot of ancient people thought about it. And that's not biblical hospitality. The purpose of hospitality. The purpose of hospitality. Is to communicate the heart of God.

It is about loving the people that God loves. The Greek word for hospitality reflects this. It's philisenia. And philisenia comes from two words.

Philop and xenos. And philop means love for close friends or family. Kind of your best friend or your family members, your brothers and sisters.

[10:21] That's the kind of love you can have for them. Philos, love. And then xenos. That's the word for stranger. So the Greek word for hospitality literally means love for the stranger. Loving strangers as though they're friends or family.

In his book, *Reaching Out*, it's a little book, but I hadn't recommended it. Henry Nouwen writes a book called *Reaching Out*, which here's how he defines hospitality. It's the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.

The creation of a free space. Now this actually helps us understand one of the common objections that we might hear when we talk about inviting the stranger. Right? The person who's not like me. Into our life. Maybe into our home. One of the first fears that rises is this. Well, if that person across the street, I can just tell by their yard signs that they believe and live very differently than me.

And you want me to have that person into my living room. What would we talk about? You know, that would be so awkward. Or do I just pretend like I think the way they think? How do I relate to such people?

[11:38] And here's what Nouwen says. He goes on to say that welcoming strangers into your life doesn't mean you have to agree with them on everything. Actually, quite the opposite. He says, when we want to be really hospitable, we not only have to receive strangers, but also to confront them by an unambiguous presence.

Not hiding ourselves behind neutrality, but showing our ideas, opinions, and lifestyle clearly and distinctly. No real dialogue is possible between somebody and a nobody.

So here's the kind of space that true hospitality creates. A space where two people have the ability to come together who may think and live very differently.

And yet, what's the key ingredient? It's not agreement. It's acceptance. So hospitality is creating a space where a person can come in and know that they will be accepted.

Regardless of what they believe or how they live. You might not necessarily agree, but they will experience acceptance. And that alone, friends, can be tremendously powerful.

[12:54] Acceptance without requiring agreement. I mean, where in our society do such spaces exist? And I want to argue almost nobody.

Wouldn't it be amazing if the church were known for that? Right? We don't want to have what we believe. We don't change it or compromise it. But you know that when you're going to come to something that is put on by this church, that you're going to be immediately accepted.

That's hospitality. Now, what's the principle behind it? In Deuteronomy 10, before God tells His people to love the vulnerable in their midst, He says this in verse 14.

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth, and everything in it. So it's saying everything that exists belongs to God.

God's entrusted things to us, but they belong to Him. So the principle behind hospitality, God says I want you to love people and welcome them in, especially the stranger.

[13:57] The principle behind that is the principle of stewardship. Everything we have belongs to God. It's His. We're stewards. What is a steward? A steward is someone who's responsible for using the stuff that's been entrusted to them in ways that reflect the priorities of the owner.

So being a good steward means I need to use my stuff in ways that reflect the priorities of God. You know what I mean? And I think this helps us make sense of the list of commands in Hebrews 13.

If you read through this passage, it kind of looks like a random catch-all, like the author of Hebrews is like, oh yeah, and do this. Oh yeah, and do this. Oh, and this other thing I forgot to tell you. But it actually holds together if you realize that behind it is the principle of stewardship.

He says don't neglect hospitality. Don't sleep with anyone you're not married to. Don't chase wealth and be content with what you have. It's like, what's the common link? Well, stewardship. Our home

and time and food belong to God.

So God's saying I want you to use them in ways that reflect my problems. Love other people. Right? Our body, our sexuality belongs to God. So he's saying I want you to use those things in ways that lead to flourishing for children and for society.

[15 : 22] Build strong marriages and honor them as sacred. Then it goes on. Our money belongs to God. So God says you should trust me to provide what you need.

Don't chase after it. Trust me. It belongs to me. I'm the one who gave it to you. Right? So it all holds together when we understand that. So here's how all of this works.

Everything we have belongs to God and he calls us to use what we have in ways that reflect his priorities. So you say, okay, what are God's priorities? Well, God loves people.

Especially people who are vulnerable. Outsiders. On the margins. So he wants us to use our resources to communicate his love for them. So it's worth thinking. How do you think about your resources?

And how do you use them? Are we prepared to open up a little bit of our time? I mean, I think in D.C. with the pace of life here, probably one of the most precious resources we have is time.

[16 : 27] Are we willing to open up space a little bit of time when somebody knocks on the door of our life? Are we willing to open up a little bit of our energy to welcome people in and to show them God's love?

Well, you know, the Benedictines took this very seriously. The Benedictine monks, one of the roles in the monastery, and you read about this in the rules of the amendment, was the porter.

And the porter would stay by the door at all times. The porter actually would even sleep next to the door. And the reason for that is because they always wanted to be ready so that when somebody came to the door of the monastery and they knocked, they would be there to greet them.

Right? And the porter was a very important role. And they were taught to expect God's blessing to come through strangers, which is beautiful. Expect that God is going to bless you through these strangers that come.

And so they would always answer the door by saying, what blessing do you bring? Can you imagine showing up and the first thing somebody asks you is, hey, what blessing do you bring?

[17 : 35] There's a dignity in it, right? What blessing do you bring? There's a dignity in it. Now, compare that to this. 20th century writer and literary critic named Dorothy Parker.

Dorothy Parker had a famously known way of answering the telephone when you called her. You called Dorothy Parker, she would pick up the phone and she would say, what fresh hell is this? so here's my question when somebody knocks on the door of your life which kind of person is your tendency to say what blessing do you bring or is it to say what fresh hell is this because many of us just our lives we just don't have room we've got so much going on we don't have space, we don't have time, we don't have margin and so it does feel like that like oh, I can't take one more thing what fresh hell are you bringing in my life with your needs it raises the question how can we become the kind of people who are willing and even eager to open our lives and communicate the love of God to the people who need to hear it because at the end of the day this is hard it is hard to create space it is hard to relate to people who are different from us it is hard to free up the time of the calendar what motivates hospitality the answer simply friends is the cross verse 12 says Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood what we need to understand is that everything that we're talking about this morning loving the outsider welcoming them in treating them as a good friend creating opportunity for them to become a member like a member of your family Jesus experienced the exact opposite of that the exact opposite because when we look at Jesus we see someone who is the ultimate insider he is the eternal son of the father he's been in the ultimate communion the ultimate relationship for all of eternity part of this eternal trinitarian existence with the father and the holy spirit Jesus had all of the glory and honor he had the place of honor at the table so to speak and if you understand the story of scripture you understand that we were the ones who even though we were inside with God in the beginning created to be part of that relationship we were the ones who left right we were the ones who broke that relationship we were the ones who were cast out because we rebelled we said I would rather live life on my terms and so we lost that right and so we were cast out so Jesus is the ultimate insider we were the ones who were cast out and yet what we see on the cross is Jesus taking our place in that role becoming the one who is cast out crying out from the cross to his father why have you forsaken him overcoming those barriers sin and death the things that bar us from relationship

with God and as it says in Ephesians burning down the dividing wall of hostility so that the things that separate us from God and one another that all of those things are put to death on the cross where Jesus becomes cast out and what that means is that the way is open and that we are welcomed in to fellowship with God and we are welcomed into relationship with one another all the things that divide us have been dealt with so the gospel is the good news that we can be welcomed in and become children of God because Jesus was cast out we can become members of God's family we can become citizens of God's kingdom

Jesus became the outcast so that we can become a family and this is the love I would say that motivates Christian hospitality when I look at the cross and when I realize that Jesus was willing to do that in order to welcome me in the least I can do is free up a little time and energy to show the same kind of love to somebody else the least I can do so gospel centered people people who have that reality in the center of their life hospitality just flows out of it right I've been loved so extravagantly with God's hospitality how can I not do the same in some small way so what does this actually look like for us to show hospitality remember this is simply about creating space so just to give you a few ideas it could simply be inviting people to go out and grab a cup that's hospitality you're just creating a space you're initiating you're putting the time and the place on the calendar two or three people let's go have coffee together people you don't know where to go that's hospitality maybe you have really young kids and I remember we used to try to have people over we had young kids and I was like

I love you I'm so glad that you're over for dinner but you have to leave because it's 730 and I'm exhausted and so you have to go away because I'm so tired because you don't see when you have a kid you're barely sleeping when you have young kids okay so maybe that doesn't work that's fine here's what you can do Saturday morning invite a few people to go hang out in the park pick up some muffins on the way and just eat muffins and drink coffee at a park or the playground that's hospitality you're just creating a space and by the way don't just invite other families with kids invite people and go to kids right people are in different stages of life go hang out at a park together that's hospitality maybe this means you are a part of something like a progressive dinner where you have people over for part of it this is something that some of you are doing in Chevrolet every year around Christmas there's a big progressive dinner where people go from house to house to house and maybe you're just a part of something like that next year hospitality could mean just you see somebody who's new at church we have a lot of people who are new right now in church it may just mean you see somebody who's new and you say hey let's grab lunch after the service some of you are doing that that's hospitality you're just creating a space youth if you're in school you know if you're in middle school or high school or well in school elementary as well and you see somebody in the cafeteria and they're not eating with anybody just going over and saying hey you want to eat with me that's hospitality you're just creating a space you're welcoming somebody you see somebody on the playground during recess and nobody's playing with them they're working off by themselves and saying hey we'll play we'll eat together that's hospitality this could mean also reaching out to non-advent friends non-church going friends and inviting them to something at church and just say hey why don't you come to the state with me and then we'll go after a lot of the events that we plan are just events that are there for you to invite other people to you know so we had a dance in the beginning of September we had a or actually the end of September we had a dance on Tuesday night we had a fire pit for guys who just want to come and hang around a fire and who doesn't want to do that with the weather like this that's kind of all I want to do right so we're going to have a fire pit there's a regular gathering on Fridays called ladies who lunch and that's very self-descriptive that's exactly what happens and we've had a great showing but that's a great thing to invite people to on December 6th we're having a

[25:45] Sarah Groves concert here the whole reason that we're doing that concert is just something to invite people to right we're going to be doing alpha next year and alpha is literally designed to be something that you can invite somebody to and then you go together hey let's go and we'll watch this video and meet some people and eat some dinner come on all of that is not to tell lastly I just want to say this could mean you actually invite people over for a meal it could mean that but I think that we need to seriously redefine what that means it does not need to be the heavy lift that we tend to think it is it really doesn't I love having people with I love preparing food for people it's one of my love languages but you have to respect the limitations of your life and your family and if this isn't realistic we'll never do it so because we have been so saturated with people like Martha Stewart at Nighting Garden we need to redefine what we mean when we think about

hosting a dinner party okay

I did this a few years ago and people found it helpful so I want to do it again we're going to just use the word Advent and as Jesus may be these are the standards that I want to hold out to you just on offer as the Advent dinner party standards so when we say dinner party I don't care what people when we talk about dinner parties this is what we mean okay alright here we go Advent A in Advent okay step one you have to ask people to promote okay it's not going to happen if you don't ask people to promote and I would just say try to figure out who actually pray about this and just ask that God would maybe put a couple of people on your heart it's easy to just do this with your friends but there might be people in the church who are less connected who are on the periphery maybe the neighbor across the street with people down the road and just say we don't know them that well how do you think you know them hey would you guys have to come over for dinner a minute right so you have to ask people to come over the D is very important don't be a perfectionist don't be a perfectionist when we create these high standards for dinner parties we create standards that we can't live up to and that's why we don't do it it's because you think the house has to be spotless and the meal has to be be and the conversation has to be perfect and the tables case has to be instagram worthy and none of that is necessary right if you want to make a really nice cassoulet and share that with people that is fantastic okay it doesn't happen you can search ramen noodles you can search spaghetti and meatballs i know one guy who just once a month he makes the same exact spaghetti and meatballs recipe and he knows when he's going to do it he's got it down to the science he knows what to buy the ingredients he's kind of built it into his life and so he has a meal ready to go locked and loaded that he doesn't even have to think about and the purpose is so that he can regulate my people to his house same exact meal every time that's awesome so you may want to spend!

some time playing but you will have to shove the junk in the corner that's what we do it's fine serve what you got the goal is what? it's creating space that's it the goal is creating so an ad can when we say dinner party you made me sit on a pile of laundry and eat rom-nude but it's going to be a meaningful experience why?

because the B stands for valuing substance over style right? the value of the time is in the quality of the connection between people that's what matters your tablespace does not matter it's like I see in the day the E is also I think very important everyone pitches in you know everyone pitches in you can say hey we'll make the main can you guys bring the drinks here you guys bring an appetizer that's great that's fine here that's totally acceptable right?

afterwards it's okay for everybody to just take a minute to help bring things into the kitchen it's totally fine right? this isn't Martha Stewart it's okay it's okay we can help we're real as soon right? because we know that maybe it's a school night your kids have to go to school in the morning we're gonna help you make sure this doesn't take until midnight right?

[30:08] the N is also great no apologizing oh my gosh no thank you the first thing you did thank you so much no apologize!

it's tough I'm so sorry I just didn't have a chance to clean I'm so sorry I thought this would be better none of them right? it's really not about them right?

there's no need to apologize I'm just glad to be in your home I'm so delighted in your home all the rest is secondary right? and then lastly hopefully goes without saying talk about things that matter you know talk about things that matter figure out maybe if you're going to spend time doing anything ahead of time think of a few questions that just kind of might get the ball rolling in a meaningful direction and if you're the host I want you to really think about talking less and asking more right? the goal is to create a space where people feel accepted right? Jesus asked way many more questions than the answer the goal is simply to create a space where that person can feel known and feel loved and feel accepted and be treated like friends and family do you want to be radically countercultural?

do you want to help people with social failure? do you want to push back against loneliness? do you want to push back against polarization?

[31:36] there's a lot of things that are outside of our control but one thing one of the things that is in our control right now practice hospitality come over and let's pray Lord we thank you for your words we thank you that we are here at your invitation to share this feast that you have prepared for us because you are gracious and loving God and that when we were outsiders you welcomed us in and we pray that this spirit of hospitality will so pervade our community that it will be one of the

things that we are known for so we're here to celebrate your love and generosity to us Lord and it's
in your name that we pray to to to to to to to to to to to to to to to to to