

HOSPITALITY AS A FORM OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

ANGELS UNWARE

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Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it- Hebrews 13:2

“The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.” So said Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, and he was right; showing kindness and mercy brings blessing to both the giver and the receiver of such grace. As a people, our faith and fate are always measured by our deeds.

The verse above, taken from Paul’s letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to be both active and expressive in showing our kindness and hospitality. The verb “to show” requires one party to initiate an action towards another. In this case, hospitality may be seen, felt, or heard. Showing hospitality requires an individual to move beyond the self in an effort to improve the condition of another. It is a call to provide light and dark places, water in dry places, and comfort and healing in broken places. Hospitality is indeed “an attribute to God Himself.”

This verse not only creates a sense of mysticism, but also one of mysteriousness. It invites us to impartiality. A stranger may be mistaken for an angel or an angel for a stranger. So that we may be safely beyond reproach, we are invited to show hospitality to everyone we meet. One of God’s angels just may be clothed in the apparel and appearance of a stranger. The person we pass on the street to whom we offer no greeting or kind word is no less deserving of it than our friends and family. If we are honest with ourselves, we find that we are often poor judges of a person’s character at first meeting. Strangers are almost always more than we imagine them to be. It is because of this that Hebrews 13:2 warns against sectarianism. It invites us to resist our tendency to judge people on the basis of their outward appearance and our own inflated sense of self. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we should not “think of ourselves more highly than we ought” (Romans 12:3).

Jesus reminds us that when we show kindness to others, we are showing kindness to Him. Similarly, if we withhold our hospitality from others, we forfeit our inheritance to the Kingdom of God. Anger echoes in the words of Christ as he says, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me

nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me” (Matthew 25: 41-43). Hospitality is the cornerstone of salvation itself. How so? The door to salvation is opened by God’s infinite kindness and mercy as he sent his son to be the sacrifice for our sins and is kept open by our unreserved acceptance of this gift. The transaction of hospitality can only be completed in acts of both giving and receiving.

Hospitality At Home: From Hostility to Hospitality

When I was about 10 years old, an elderly relative stopped by our home to rest from the sweltering Jamaican sun. Back then, people walked long distances to get from place to place. She asked me for a glass of water, and I quickly obliged. To this day, I cannot recall a time that someone enjoyed a glass of water as much as she had that hot day. She said that it was the best glass of water she ever had. I offered a second glass and she gladly accepted. She drank the two glasses of water and sat on the verandah for another 15 minutes before turning again to face the heat of the sun. She thanked me for the shade and the water and left my boyhood world. What I learned that day has never left me. Hospitality is a spiritual experience for both the giver and the receiver. Our churches, our families, indeed, the world desperately needs the renewal of goodwill that is found when we open our doors and our hearts to others.

The family is constantly under siege by the enemy. When we look at the state of marriage in our society, we need little convincing of this fact. Some 50% of first marriages fail, and 60% of second marriages quickly find their way into divorce court. Kindness seems to have become lost in conflict and altruism replaced with altercation. Our homes will enjoy greater peace and stability when we relearn some of the most basic components of hospitality. We need to make the following inquiries a part of our regular conversation with our spouses:

- ❖ A pleasant good morning to you. How did you sleep last night?
- ❖ I am sorry you are not feeling well. Can I make you some tea or soup?
- ❖ I will get that for you. Will that be all, or can I get you something else?
- ❖ Let me help you clean the house today. In fact, I’ll do it. Where should I start?

- ❖ Why don't I treat you for dinner tonight by ordering in. What would you like?
- ❖ Go back to sleep. I'll change the baby.

When practiced at home, hospitality has the potential to unlock unconditional and sacrificial love in our marriage and family lives. It elevates feelings of wellbeing and love in our entire family allowing us to dwell in places of healing and redemption that the enemy of our souls can never reach. Where hospitality exists, name-calling, selfishness, and blame are often absent. Moreover, and just as importantly, it is critical to remember that the greatest lessons we teach our children are tacit, taught through actions rather than words. How we treat others, our loved ones and family members, delivers a much louder lesson to our children than anything we might tell them with our voices. Whether we are aware of this or not, we are always teaching. When we remember this, we are more likely to model behaviors of kindness and good manners. The greatest teacher who ever lived delivered many of His lessons through modeling. He once gathered a basin, water and a towel and washed the feet of his protégés. In the end, He told them that just as He washed their feet they, too, must learn to wash one another's feet.

Hospitality and The Church: The Greatest Revolving Door

We have far too often heard such comments as, "I won't be going back to that church. The members are cold and distant." Less frequently we may hear, "From the moment I entered that church, I felt warm and genuine love." The truth is, many people go to church seeking solace and refuge from a hostile and cruel world. It is unfortunate that they too often have negative experiences in churches where they feel less than welcome. Instead of feeling peace and love, many individuals experience the same sort of negativity and antagonism within a church as they do outside of it. Churches fail to thrive for a host of reasons, most of which are not discussed here. However, it is fair to say that churches fail to welcome guests in fellowship will most likely find their doors revolving at a dizzying speed.

The ways correct this problem are surprisingly simple. Here are six suggestions:

1. Instead of making visitors search for seating themselves, which can be particularly difficult in large congregations where seating is limited, offer an usher to help them find a place they feel comfortable.
2. Develop a culture where all members work together to welcome new worshipers by showing kindness and adopting a warm, friendly attitude.
3. Names are important. Learning people's names shows them they matter and imparts a feeling of genuine fellowship.
4. What we say from the pulpit matters more than we might realize. Proper pulpit etiquette can make the difference between retaining congregants and losing them.
5. It is critical to find a balance between showing genuine interest and what some might consider prying or "snooping." We must make an effort to show that we care without coming across as being nosy.
6. Lastly, but certainly no less important is to ensure that visitors are encouraged to come back. Nothing shows genuine caring more than expressing a desire to interact with an individual again.

The Apostle Paul invites us to hospitality when he says, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

Nothing is more critical to building a congregation than retaining membership. This involves learning how to show hospitality to all who enter our houses of worship. As it is in our families and personal lives so it is in our congregations. People will stay when they are treated with kindness and shown respect and love. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that, as intelligent beings, we all know intrinsically when we are being treated with genuine kindness or when we are being marginalized, ignored, or belittled.

One Sunday morning in August 2010 my phone rang at about 5:00 in the morning. I picked it up to hear a familiar but panicked voice on the other end of the line. "Pastor, the church is on fire!" I leapt out of bed and asked him to repeat what he just said. I could not believe my ears. With an even greater urgency he cried, "The church is on fire!!" In a fog, I threw on my clothes and made my way as fast as possible to my church. I, along with several elders, arrived in time to see the last few embers of my beloved building flicker and die out under a shower of sooty water. Bemused, I turned to see the sun peeking through the New York City skyline and watched, in disbelief and grief, as it climbed above the apartment buildings and greeted

the day, unaware of the tragedy below. To say we were devastated is an understatement.

Later that day, we gathered together for prayer at the home of one of our members seeking the comfort that can only be found in the presence of a shared grief. By the time we arrived, food and drink had already been prepared. This small act of hospitality provided us with a tremendous amount of comfort and solace. I was again touched by the kindness of others earlier in the day, when I had reached out to my District Overseer who in turn contacted a colleague from the nearby Seventh-day Adventist church. Because of these magnanimous and selfless individuals, we had a new place to gather in worship the very next Sunday. My meeting with the pastor of that congregation touched me and remains with me just as the incident with the glass of water and my elderly relative had so many years before. "Pastor," he said, "as long as you are here, I want you to feel comfortable." He then added, "These books are yours to use, these robes are yours to use, and if there's anything else that you need, do not hesitate to ask." This act of kindness left an indelible mark on my soul. The fire that ravaged my church dampened my spirit and left my congregation feeling diminished and unsure of its future. This man's love and generosity replenished my soul and brought peace to my young congregation. God's grace and comfort were uncovered in the act of a neighbor who took the time to call me at five in the morning, in the welcoming and comforting walls of a church members' home, in the call made by the overseer to the pastor of a neighboring church, in the church board and members who welcomed us to their house of worship. When I meditate on these acts of kindness, I see the full scope of God's unending love. The fire that tried to break our spirit only reinforced our belief in the kindness of mankind. A beautiful epilogue to this story is that, in the end, the fire rejuvenated our congregation. We have a newfound vitality, enjoyed a significant growth in membership, and seen the explosion of our community outreach initiatives (Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen).

The world desperately needs more people willing to share their fish and bread with others. He needs more good Samaritans who will refuse to pass by a dying man who will offer their seat on a public bus to a pregnant mother, will help an elderly woman with her groceries.

I have seen Angels, and I have been aware that they are in fact Angels even though they may have appeared otherwise. The world has become so overburdened with animosity, with hardship, with anger, people too often

live their lives on autopilot, expecting the worst and never attempting to right countless wrongs. We have forgotten what it means to be human. We have forgotten what it means to be Christian. We have forgotten that it is not every man for himself, we are all connected and we all have the ability to improve each other's lives.

Hospitality is a form of inescapable spiritual excursion that grounds us deep within God's grace and our humanity. When fully manifested, it refreshes the soul and inspires goodwill within all of us:

- Please, I insist you can have my seat.
- Welcome to our church - welcome to our home- welcome to our school... you are very welcome!
- We would like to invite you over for lunch this week, this Easter, this Thanksgiving – this day.

Showing hospitality guards us against the brutality and indifference that has become all too commonplace today. Animosity, aggression, hatred and anger are all played out schoolyards, churchyards, and backyards again and again. Indeed, our very language is rife with enmity and opposition. Acts of kindness confront this negativity head on. Adopting an attitude of hospitality invites us to consider others as much as we consider ourselves. If we are thirsty, others just might be thirsty as well. If we are hungry, there's a good chance others are, too. This is the spiritual nature and discipline of hospitality. The water that is offered to us by a friend, neighbor, even a stranger will always taste better than that which we draw ourselves. Those who hoard will find holes in their baskets, and those who gather without disbursing shall forever disburse without ever accruing. The Apostle Paul tells us, "If your enemy hunger feed him and if he is thirsty give him drink," (Romans 12:20). We must keep in mind that our differences have nothing to do with our basic human needs. A thirsty person is not a thirsty enemy, merely a fellow man in need of a drink of water.

Today, I invite you to look for opportunities to show kindness to your neighbor, your brother, your spouse, a stranger. If you seek out kindness, it will find you. In doing this, we expand the virtue of mercy that "droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath" adding joy to our lives and bringing us a little bit closer to living out our call to be Christians.