



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dearest family,

If I had to give a title to my message on Sunday I would have called it: 'The Cross and the Pineapple.' I spoke about Christian hospitality, exhorted at the beginning of Hebrews 13. I reminded you that the church was born in homes. Hospitality was the DNA of the fellowship. They met house to house ((Romans 16:5); teaching reflects a home context (Acts 20:20); worship was clearly participation worship in the home including the manifestation of spiritual gifts (Colossians 3:16); the agape meal was served in the home (Acts 2:46); all the "one another" exhortations assume a home gathering. We also noted that the Last Supper, in a home and around a table, expressed everything we understand to be basic to a church gathering: developing relationships, worshiping God, hearing the Word, asking questions, offering prayers, celebrating communion, serving others and reaching the world. Again, all this was in a setting of hospitality. Similar settings had been the contexts for massive breakthroughs and breakouts of the kingdom of God: at the wedding at Cana of Galilee; at the Samaritan village where the woman at the well lived and the good news came to the non-kosher rejected Samaritans; at the home of the Pharisee where the redeemed prostitute washed His feet and the power of forgiveness is demonstrated; at the home of Zaccheus where Jesus establishes what it truly means to be a son of Abraham; at Bethany where He shows that hospitality is not just about Martha Stewart's great meal, but about Mary's intimacy; at the home in Emmaus where He reveals His resurrection power when He breaks the bread.

All these observations raise the necessary and non-negotiable matter of the practice of hospitality as fundamental to our understanding of the character of a Christian disciple, and therefore of Christian community, Christian relationships, but also of the church's relationship with the world. We noted some things that relate hospitality to the foundations of community (you will have to download for all the details):

1. **Hospitality is the basis for communion and community with Jesus and the Father.** It is the image of spiritual relationship and salvation. "*We will make our home with him*" (John 14:23)
2. **Hospitality is the non-negotiable means for the proclamation and propagation of the gospel.** When Jesus commissioned His disciples to go into the nation and preach and heal he added this instruction: "*Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave*" (Matthew 10:11). Hospitality was the sign of receptivity. It is the hospitality of a Gentile to Peter the Jew that breaks open the mission to the Gentiles. Hospitality is the key bridge to racial reconciliation, and here, the greatest irreconciliation of Jew and Gentile is overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hospitality shatters social and racial boundaries, and invites a deep sharing of cultures, as expressed in how we live and how we eat and what we eat, and how we decorate and what we hang on our walls. Talking of world-shaking breakthroughs that began with hospitality. It was in the home of Philemon that reconciliation was effected when a slave became a brother. It started with hospitality. It was there too that Paul could write with confidence, "*Prepare a guest room for me.*" It is Lydia's hospitality in Philippi ("*she invited us to her home*" Acts 16:15) that led to a church in her home that became the door for mission to barbarian Europe

3. **Hospitality was the context for discipleship and training.** In Acts 18: 24-26 we read that when Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos teaching, *“they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”* Paul’s summary of his ministry in Acts 20:20 was that he taught *“house to house.”*
4. **Hospitality is the key to relating to fellow believers and to reaching your neighbors and the world.** My heart and my home become the building blocks of the church. It is hospitality and not the building fund that accommodates the work of the church. How accessible is your home. Can people come in? Are people invited in? The privatization of the home has deformed the life of the church. John writes in his epistle *“we ought to show hospitality”* (3 John 1:8). He is writing to Gaius who has already been referred to in Romans 16:23 *“Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy”*. Paul’s thinking is clearly presented in Romans 12:13 *“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”* Peter writes, *“The end of all things is near ... Love each other deeply ... Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling”* (1 Peter 4:9). But there is a cost to hospitality, a sacrifice. It requires generosity. Why does he say *“without grumbling”*? Because it is seldom what we want. It is bothersome, intrusive, time consuming. Taking both the Romans 12 and Petrine text together let’s make the point. **Hospitality is a non-negotiable expression of our faith working through love.** Perhaps most telling are the words of Jesus. *“When you have a dinner ... do not invite your friends ... invite the poor”* (Luke 14:12-14) How much more reconciliation, how many more conversions would there have been if we were hospitable. Most discomfoting are the words of Jesus’ parable in the words of the judging King: *“I was a stranger and you did not invite me in.”* Hospitality is a sign of kingdom ministry which attracts the blessing of God. Its absence attracts words of judgment. God takes our lack of response to others personally – it is a failure to welcome Him, befriend Him, bless Him, invite Him. Just one important scriptural observation. *“The overseer must be ... hospitable ... Since an overseer is entrusted work ... he must be hospitable”* (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). This is the most neglected qualification for leadership in the church. It should be noted that hospitality comes after the requirement that a leader be *“self-controlled”*. Someone has written that this is because: *“self-mastery makes self-giving possible.”* If there is no hospitality there is no church growth.
5. **Hospitality was a moral, an ethical issue for everyone, not just a possible practice for those who felt so inclined or gifted.** In the ancient world, hospitality was incumbent on all, was always regarded as a sacred duty. The moralism of hospitality is not difficult to understand given the way that it affirms human dignity and equality, and seeks another’s good, and gives rather than takes. Someone put it like this: *“Christian hospitality was a subversive act that obliterated societal barriers involving gender, race, economic condition, and citizenship status, and also directly attacked the often deadly devaluing of the personhood of ‘undesirables’. The extension of hospitality was a moral statement with moral overtones.”*

Of course, there are obstacles that we all have to deal with. What would be on your list? Would it include: *Too much to do, too little time, too little energy, too little money, too much bother, too much work, too intrusive on private space, too much shame, too little skill and experience, too insecure, too shy.* These hindrances explain why hospitality is a command, a discipline. Hospitality is a conscious decision because it involves a conscious obedience, and a conscious commitment and a conscientious effort. We should begin by asking for two things:

- ❑ For a **prepared heart** for Christ’s concerns and affections and perceptions
- ❑ For a **prepared home** – for others not just oneself. Asking not only for those we want but for those who need us

Take some first achievable steps. Open your home for something, to someone. Jesus was sensitive to how hospitality was shown to Him, or not shown to Him. Get intentional about community building through hospitality. When I did premarital counseling I asked couples to accept one particular discipline: once a month do a dinner party, inviting Christian friends one month, non-Christian friends the second month, and a mix the third month. Repeat every quarter. We cannot be sure of the guarantees of the continuance of public worship in church buildings. But no matter. As long as we understand that the church in the home is the basis of community life, we will not miss a beat. Hospitality is also a corporate discipline, which will determine how we are as a place of welcome and incorporation. Hospitality requires that we be a community for all nations, that we be committed to be a reconciled and reconciling community. How are we expressing hospitality corporately? How are we doing at it?

We are invited to co-host the church and the world with the supping and serving Christ. May His grace as a guest and His generosity as a host, be our example as we cultivate and preserve our obedience to scripture. "Pursue hospitality." And by the way, while you are doing that, He is also still in the hospitality business. *"I go to prepare a place for you ... In my father's house are many mansions"* (John 14:2). The Bible began with hospitality and it ends that way with the presentation in Revelation 19 of the marriage feast of the Lamb for a reconciled crowd. It never ends ... He will not be outdone. His reward is with him. Let the discipline of hospitality recover its meaning and its joy in all our homes, and may it become the clearest expression of the presence of Jesus in our domicile, for as He said, when you invited them, you invited me to be present. And when you didn't invite anyone, guess who else did not show up?

This is a costly discipline, but it is powerful to the pulling down of strongholds like marginalization, privatization, institutionalization, separation, isolation, irreconciliation and loneliness, and it is powerful to the building up of relationship, friendship, trust and shared joy ... in a word, building up God's house of living stones. May our tables be the extension leaves of the table of the Lord. May the cost of our hospitality be a willing sacrifice, given the cost of the meal of bread and wine that we share every eucharist that brought us into this household. I raise my glass to hospitality! Cheers to bread and wine, to loaves and fishes, tacos and salsa, to burgers and fries, soup and salad, cheese and crackers, to dessert and coffee – cheers to your house that is the truest expression of God's house. Practice hospitality.

Hospitably yours,
Stuart