

Welcome One Another

Hebrews 13:1-3, Romans 12:9-16, I Cor.5:15-17

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Welcome...what a joy to be warmly welcomed and to receive the generous hospitality of others. Can you think of an occasion when you experienced this? Perhaps you also experienced the opposite? Turn and tell someone.

“What are you doing here?” I was asked this by a male classmate in seminary. Given the time, the issue of women in ministry was for some, still a work in progress, and that is putting it politely. I told him that I was doing exactly the same thing he was doing: listening for God’s call on my life. (PCUSA has ordained women as pastors since 1956.)

Historically, hospitality has been and continues to be a very significant value in Middle Eastern culture. Hence the story of Abraham and the three visitors. It was important to entertain them, offer food and drink and fellowship. There is some speculation that these three visitors may well have been the Holy Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit! They certainly give Abraham and Sarah unbelievably good news! And the writer of Hebrews reminds us that in showing hospitality to strangers, some have entertained angels, unaware! I don’t know about you, but that’s an experience I would not want to miss!

Earlier this week we marked the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In the midst of the horrific death and destruction of that day, something amazing and life-giving happened in the small town of Gander, Newfoundland, Canada. The airport in Gander marks the closest point between Europe and the US, and it is a preferred emergency landing spot of medical and other emergencies. Within the hours immediately following the terrorist attacks in the US, 38 trans-Atlantic flights were grounded at the Gander airport. The passengers on those flights had no idea what had happened, nor why their flights were redirected. When told, many were stunned hearing the news of the terrorist attacks in NYC, PA and on the Pentagon. But what happened next is what is amazing.

The 10,000 citizens of Gander, Newfoundland swung into action and mobilized one of the largest “welcome wagon” operations ever known. Suddenly they were host to 6,700 guests from all over the world, for five days.

Meals were needed—Gander became “casserole city”! Grocery store shelves quickly emptied, as residents began cooking and baking, while the local hockey rink was transformed into the world’s largest refrigerator!

750 people were housed at a local elementary school, turned emergency shelter. Every school, gym, community center, church or camp, was converted to sheltering passengers. The 500 local hotel rooms were reserved for the pilots and flight crews from the 38 planes. Due to security concerns, all luggage remained on the planes. Hence the need for clothing and toiletries in addition to toys for children and bedding and towels for everyone. Volunteers organized the donations and distribution. Local pharmacists went to work calling internationally to fill prescriptions for those in need of medication.

The outpouring of kindness multiplied over the next five days. Local residents opened their homes to total strangers for showers, meals and lodging. They took passengers sightseeing, moose hunting, berry picking, and barbequing.

Without exception, all the citizens refused offers of money in exchange for their hospitality, while later passengers donated thousands to the town.

Those who participated had this to say:

Diane Davis, a local teacher—"People say we did an amazing thing. Bottom line I don't think so. I think it was the right thing to do."

Linda Sweetapple, accountant—"We didn't know how we would be affected, if the people who were coming were good or not so good people. We just knew that we had to make room for them and take care of them. They were here, and they needed our help."

Robert Steuber, a passenger stranded there with his wife and elderly father-in-law said he never felt like an outsider. "That whole community is the poster child for hospitality and just how a sincere act of humanity should be. They had such a high level of open arms and [making people feel] welcome."

This experience had such a profound effect on the life of passenger Kevin Tuerff, whose Paris to NYC flight was diverted Gander, that he wrote a book titled Channel of Peace, as well as being the force behind a movement called Pay It Forward 9/11, that urges people to perform acts of kindness.

The citizens of Gander say that prejudice is an entirely foreign concept there. Some residents have maintained relationships with the passengers that were once stranded in their town. But more than that, since 9/11 they have raised thousands of Canadian dollars to welcome four Syrian refugee families into the community, with a fifth family scheduled to arrive next year.

When tragedy strikes—as we have seen recently with Hurricanes Harvey and Irma—people rise to the occasion and offer help, and hospitality to complete strangers. But the truth of it is, we should live this way every day.

Let Love be genuine...(Romans 12:9)

I was surprised to learn that the word translated “genuine” is literally, in Greek, “un-hypo-critical”.

Chew on that one for a minute: un-hypo-critical. This word was often used of an actor’s mask, with which people could pretend to be various characters. Paul’s concern is that no one put on a “mask of love” and *pretend* to care for one another.

So...while we are to avoid pretense, is it possible to love one another in this way? It reminds me of the bumper sticker I told about a couple weeks ago:

For a time there was a proliferation of those that said: Jesus loves you and so do I! I think is more honest: Jesus loves you and I’m trying!

*For love to “be genuine”...*

... does not mean that you are BFFS or best friends with everyone...(you will have more in common with some than with others) it means that you and I will *show to each person the respect and esteem that is theirs by nature of the fact that they too are made in the image of God, Christ died for them as well as for you and me.*

So we are to welcome one another as Christ would welcome us...think of the prodigal Father who welcomed the son home...oblivious to his appearance (disheveled, downright dirty) and his odor (think barnyard).

Jesus was repeatedly chastised by the religious leaders of his day for fraternizing with the down and out, the poor, the outcasts, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the lepers. Who might the lepers of today be?? Perhaps those who are HIV positive, opioid or otherwise drug or alcohol addicted? Jesus even conveyed value and worth to children and to women--those who had no legal status and were considered property!

Jesus loved and welcomed into his presence “the least, the last, and the lost”.

If everyone matters to God, everyone had better matter to us!

We too must genuinely learn to love others and extend a warm, hospitable welcome to all. A few chapters later Paul writes (in Romans 15:7)

*“Accept one another then, just as Christ has accepted you.”*

Paul writes this to the believers in Rome because there were at least two different cultures in that church (Jews and Gentiles) and these groups had differing traditions relative to certain foods and religious festivals. Instead of arguing about which one was "right", *Paul urged them to accept their differences*; accept those who were weaker/newer in their faith and not argue about their opinions.

Accepting one another as Chris accepts us...this means more than meeting under the same roof. The verb *accept literally means "to receive into someone's heart"*. You do not agree to disagree and then never talk to each other again. You accept one another in your hearts. It is the same verb that is used in Acts 28 when Luke describes how the citizens of Malta received those who'd been shipwrecked off their shores. They accepted them, welcomed them, showed them hospitality in a manner similar to the people of Gander, Newfoundland received the passengers on 9/11.

The same verb is used in John 14:2 to describe how Jesus will receive us when we arrive in heaven. God will accept us on the basis of the amazing love and grace displayed on the cross of Calvary. (p.7 M. Lucado, *Love In Spite of Differences*)

So if we were to love others in this way, and extend a warm welcome and hospitality to all, what would that look like for us here at CPC today?

Recently I saw my eye doctor, and it is confirmed. I need new lenses!

So if I were doing a "children's message"—and there is a child inside each one of us-- I might put on my granddaughter's Hello Kitty glasses, so that I see things differently, as if from God's point of view.

1—Paul says We will no longer see others from a "human point of view" with all our labels/distinctions, etc. Rather we would see the other as someone who matters to God, someone who is God's beloved, made in the image of God. If it helps, imagine putting on new glasses, so that it is as if you are viewing others through God's eyes.

If we view others through God's lenses, we will *not* see their age, race, sex. We will not see their tattoos, piercings, hair (or lack of it), clothes, shoes, or whatever.

*What will we see? We will see someone who matters to God. Someone who is seeking spiritual truth. Someone whom God has brought to us for a reason. Someone in need of love and a place to belong.*

2—when that is the case, when we are seeing others differently, THEN we will welcome them sincerely—no matter where they chose to sit in worship (yes, even if they are sitting in your favorite spot!)

We will learn their name(s) and find out something about them.

We will invite them to join us downstairs for coffee.

We will introduce them to at least one other person.

We will focus on them, and take our time. We can catch up with our friends later.

Or, if we are getting our coffee downstairs and see someone we're unfamiliar with, we will take the initiative to meet them and introduce ourselves. No excuses: "I'm an introvert". So am I (I know it's hard to believe!) But, practice helps, each interaction becomes easier, I promise!

I realize that this may push some of you beyond your comfort zone.

While hospitality is a spiritual gift for some, it is the responsibility of ALL of us. Practice. Practice. Practice. It gets easier each time.

Let me tell you about Bill and Doris Horton. Bill is (now retired) dispatcher for a trucking company, Doris is a homemaker. At the time I knew them their two daughters were in high school and their son was married with two young children.

Sunday was family day at the Hortons and every Sunday without fail, Doris would prepare a meal—with the intention that it be shared with others. Each Sunday Bill and Doris were intentionally on the lookout for visitors, for the person who was recently widowed, for a college student who might like a home cooked meal. It was a rare Sunday that they went home alone. Theirs was the gift of hospitality, as I had never experienced it before. The focus was not on gourmet food or fancy décor—the focus was on relationships. Their immediate family was almost always present. And when the grandchildren and their parents were departing, the guests received warm hugs and good-byes as if they were a part of the family. And they were!

Think about it...if each one of us made the effort—even one Sunday a month—to meet and greet a visitor, or even to reach out to someone you don't know well—you'd both make a new friend.

When was the last time you added someone new to your circle of friends??

What better time than this anniversary year, to work on our welcoming skills?

Is Calvary a place you'd be comfortable inviting a friend?

Guests may visit once, but will they return? It is up to you and me to welcome them as Christ has welcomed us!

Before we leave today we will sing: "They will know we are Christians by our love..."

Will they? Only time will tell!

Oh..and don't forget your glasses!

Let us pray:

Loving God,

Help us to see others, and yes, even ourselves, as those who matter to You,

Those made in Your image,

Those for whom Christ died and rose again.

May we welcome and accept one another as you have, us.

In the name of Jesus...and all God's people said,

Amen!