

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for not just saving me, but for also giving me abilities to use to bless your people and honor you. Help me see the ways you want me to use my gifts today, and every day that follows, to bless others. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Building Community through Hospitality

We have entered into the sugar days of the year with a candy holiday, a pie holiday, a cookie holiday, and a champagne holiday all packed into 63 glorious days. Maybe we like to slather our gatherings with sweets because they can often be rather bitter.

What the world needs more than ever is the hospitality of Christ.

The word hospitality means more than simply entertaining- think a well-set table, spotless house, clean furnishings, fine food and drink. The Greek word *philoxenos* as used in 1 Peter 4:9 means to be fond of guests, and Romans 12:13 *philoxenia* which means literally, lover of strangers. Hospitality to the early Church had little to do with the atmosphere of someone's home, but an atmosphere of welcome within someone's heart.

An atmosphere of welcome always begins in the heart, because the things that keep us from being hospitable to one another also begin in the heart. A heart of welcome listens to understand. This heart comes from a place of humility and generosity. This heart has been wholeheartedly pursued by a Jesus who loves to draw near to its suffering and anguish. As you have been loved, so love. Jesus was the forerunner of *philoxenia*- lover of strangers, because he chose to love first those who were most unlovable: the outcasts, the swindlers, the lustful.

So, as we enter the craziest 63 days of the year, would we give ourselves grace, prayerfully invite Christ to soften our hearts to our enemies, and listen to understand. This is true hospitality.

The following differentiation between “hospitality” and “entertaining” was made by Karen Mains in *Open Heart, Open Home* (Elgin, Ill.: Cook, 1976) and Jen Wilkin:

If your house isn't orderly on a daily basis, you will withhold hospitality from others? Do you look across a disordered landscape of scattered laundry, newspapers, dusty baseboards, and crafts? Do you hide clutter in the dryer or dishwasher when guests drop by?

Entertaining involves setting the perfect tables setting; it requires every throw pillow to be in place, every cobweb to be eradicated, every child to be neat and orderly. It plans extra time to don the perfect outfit before the first guest touches the doorbell on the seasonally decorated doorstep. And should any element of the plan fall short, entertaining perceives the entire evening to have been tainted. Entertaining focuses attention on self.

Hospitality involves setting a table that makes everyone feel comfortable. It chooses a menu that allows face time with guests instead of being chained to the stovetop. It picks up the house to make things pleasant, but doesn't feel the need to conceal evidences of everyday life. It sometimes sits down to dinner with flour in its hair. It allows the gathering to be shaped by the quality of the conversation rather than the cuisine. Hospitality shows interest in the thoughts, feelings, pursuits, and preferences of its guests. It is good at asking questions and listening intently to answers. Hospitality focuses attention on others.

Entertaining is always thinking about the next course. Hospitality burns the rolls because it was listening to a story.

Entertaining obsesses over what went wrong. Hospitality savors what was shared.

Entertaining, exhausted, says “It was nothing, really!” Hospitality thinks it was nothing. Really.

Entertaining seeks to impress. Hospitality seeks to bless.

But the two practices can look so similar. Two people can set the same beautiful table and serve the same gourmet meal, one with a motive to impress, the other with a motive to bless. How can we know the difference? Only the second would invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind to pull up a chair and sip from the stemware (Luke 14:12–14). Our motives are revealed not just in how we set our tables, but in who we invite to join us at the feast. Entertaining invites those whom it will enjoy. Hospitality takes all comers.

Hospitality is about many things, but it is not about keeping a constantly orderly home. Orderly house or not, hospitality throws wide the doors. It offers itself expecting nothing in return. It keeps no record of its service, counts no cost, craves no thanks. It is nothing less than the joyous, habitual offering of those who recall a gracious table set before them in the presence of their enemies (Psalm. 23:5), of those who look forward to a glorious table yet to come (Revelation 19:6–9). It is a means by which we imitate our infinitely hospitable God.

Siblings of Christ, forego the empty pleasure of entertaining. Serve instead the high-heaped feast of hospitality, even as it has been served to you.

Entertaining says, “I want to impress you with my home, my clever decorating, my cooking.” Hospitality, seeking to minister, says, “This home is a gift from my heavenly Father. I use it as He desires.” Hospitality aims to serve.

Entertaining puts things before people. “As soon as I get the house finished, the living room decorated, my housecleaning done—then I will start inviting people. Hospitality puts people first. “No furniture—we’ll eat on the floor.” “The decorating may never get done—you come anyway.” “The house is a mess—but you are friends—come home with us.”

Entertaining subtly declares, “This home is mine, an expression of my personality. Look, please, and admire.” Hospitality whispers, “What is mine is yours.”

What do you do when someone just drops by unexpectedly and expresses a desire and need to talk to you or simply fellowship with you? Keep them outside until the house is clean...entertainer...Welcome them in, provide a road map through the Legos, past frantic yet loving barking of the puppies, over the stuffed animals and round the baby dolls, dodging the kamikaze pet hair...don’t mind all the sewing, knitting, crocheting or other craft projects - to a seat in your living room or at your dining room table...showing hospitality... When someone needs your company what do you do?

God is in the business of building His church...the picture we get of how this works is in the wonderful imagery of the body with individual parts contributing to the whole.

Ephesians 4:15–16 - but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

So, for that to happen...every believer has to come to an understanding that to be part of God’s building program you can’t live in isolation...you have to be part of a group...a community...a community of people who are committed to their Savior and committed to one another and committed to the building process...

With that building process there is an understanding that God is going to bring people to us...and God expects us to treat them in a particular way. So, we understand that we need each other, every day and every week we have the potential for God to bring some new person into our life and to our church and He expects us to behave appropriately. With those thoughts in mind return your hearts and mind to our Scripture Reading - 1 Peter 4:1-11 and let’s consider Christian Hospitality - Building Community through Hospitality...

Hospitality is a welcome of the Heart. Hospitality is a valuable spiritual asset for community building. It is a sacred ancient art that makes room at the table of consciousness for everyone, stranger and guest alike. In the genuine warmth and welcoming spirit that hospitality is most known for, it spans cultural divides as a nonviolent pathway, transcending background and nationality.

At one point we were all strangers on the outside looking in...and now in the church, we become a community of former strangers welcomed into the family of God with open arms because of the powerful, cleansing, life-giving, life-changing blood of our Savior!

Peter continues teaching how Christians should live in response to the understanding that the end of all things is near. History marches on towards a close, and Christ may return as judge at any time. Peter's first command in this passage was to keep our minds clear and alert so we can pray. Next, he told us to strive to love each other earnestly, as an athlete works to win a race.

Now in this this verse, Peter urges Christians to demonstrate love by offering hospitality without grumbling. Modern Christians tend to think of hospitality as having people over for dinner, or hosting a visiting missionary family. In Peter's Day, Christian hospitality was a much greater need and had the potential to be a great burden, as well.

For one thing, many Christians were forced to flee persecution. Often, this meant traveling with limited means. These refugees relied on brothers and sisters in Christ to share homes and food, as they passed through from one town or region to another.

Such hospitality could be risky. For one, those doing the sharing may not have had much themselves. For another, sharing your home with strangers could be dangerous if they weren't who they claimed to be. Even legitimate believers could take advantage of a fellow Christian's generosity beyond what was reasonable. Still, Peter reminds his readers—and us—that is how family loves each other. It's part of our purpose as God's set-apart people. We should embrace the opportunity to give that kind of sacrificial love, instead of offering such hospitality reluctantly.

Fifth Ave. United Methodist Church, God is calling us to be a community of believers, who openly welcome others – it is a joyous team effort! Come, let's leave the church and spread Christian hospitality to the city and beyond. Amen.