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Title: Practice Hospitality

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Scripture: [Luke 14:1,7-14](#)

Text: [Hebrews 13:1-3](#)

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Yesterday was the end of “Catch me at My Best”, a program about service that is annually offered by the Hilton Hotel chain worldwide. I’ll admit that I unaware of this program. While we have spent more than just a few nights in hotels this summer and several nights in Hiltons, it wasn’t until we spent a night at a Hilton Garden Inn in

Granbury, Texas that I knew the program existed.

At best I could tell, this program is several years old. It works this way. There are special cards around the hotel that you can use to recognize an employee. They were in our room, in the lobby, and the restaurant. But the hotel team in Granbury is really into the program. So when we checked-in, we received a room upgrade because Ann is a diamond member. Then, the desk clerk offered a form in the event we wanted to nominate her. When I asked someone where the ice machine was, a helpful maid showed me the way and offered a catch-me card. When we finished breakfast and had great service from a delightful woman named Mary, she said, “Would you nominate me?” Finally, when we asked for a one-hour extension at check out, the answer was “yes” and “here’s a card.”

Hilton describes it as an “inspired friendly competition” and it was friendly although a little aggressive. They also say, it “gives us the opportunity to recognize all the acts of hospitality — big and small — that make our company so special.” I can’t fault Hilton for trying to use this world-wide competition to encourage staff excellence. But they don’t understand the difference between service and hospitality.

Service is what you do to or for someone. We got terrific service. But hospitality is how you make someone feel. Hospitality is the attitude and practice of providing an atmosphere and opportunity, however risky, in which strangers are to feel accepted, safe and welcomed. Hospitality is a fundamental trait of a Christian, an essential component of being a Christ-

follower. It is why our text today challenges us. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." (Hebrews 13:2a)

There were no Hilton Garden Inns in the first century. But there were inns. You know this because when Jesus is born, we hear "...there is no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:9b) Even if there was room in the inn, Mary and Joseph might not have stayed there. Urban inns in Bible times were often dangerous places with dishonest innkeepers and criminal patrons. Travelers like Mary and Joseph sought shelter in a spare bedroom or upper room in a private house. They were called katalumas.¹ You thought Airbnb was a modern concept? Hospitality in the towns and cities depended on people opening their homes to strangers.

There was a network of rural inns in the ancient near east called caravanserai.² They were built along the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty, beginning some 200 years before the birth of Jesus. Caravanserai were a camel's day's walk apart and considered safe because there were gates and security paid by a commerce tax. On the first floor was a stable-like area for animals and on the second floor, open-air and sided rooms for the travelers. Instant community was formed with strangers who practiced hospitality because they felt safe, accepted and welcomed. Historians believe that caravanserai were important paths for cultural, commercial and technological exchange between traders and merchants, pilgrims and nomads. In a dialog with fellow travelers, stories were shared and new insights gained.³

Imagine the challenge of finding hospitable lodging as a Christian in the latter part of the first century. Two events dramatically threatened the early church and Christian travelers. In 64 AD, a great fire spread through Rome. Historians believe Nero set the fire to create a new urban landscape. But he blamed the Christians for it, starting first of seven major persecutions of Christians. Nero thought up unheard-of cruelties to torture and kill Christians. It was a very scary time. We can't begin to imagine the fear that Christians experienced. Our concern about terrorism or anxiety about mass shootings is tiny compared to their daily fear of persecution.

Six years later, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem accelerated the spread of Christians throughout Asia Minor and Southern Europe. Christianity was on the move, a nomad people. If they didn't travel by ship, Christians used the caravanserai throughout Asian and into southern Europe and then, upon reaching their destination, sought out other Christians, staying in their guest rooms, their katalumas. But the early Christian community knew that the act of opening their home was dangerous. A stranger could be a fellow

sojourner in Christ or an informer of the Roman Empire. Practicing hospitality was risky.

During this frightening time of Nero's persecution, when the world was filled with fear, anger, and hostility, the author of the book of Hebrews writes, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." (Hebrews 13:2a) And then, if the image of persecution at the hands of a crazy Emperor wasn't fresh in their minds, "Remember those in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are tortured, as if you were being tortured." (Hebrews 13:3)

Why do that? Why extend hospitality to strangers in a time when a stranger might be an informant and place them and the entire church at risk? Because, he says, "...for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2) This isn't a literal reference. It is a reminder of their heritage. At the Oaks of Mamre, the great patriarch was Abraham. As he sat in front of his tent during the heat of the day, he saw three strangers standing near him. He welcomes them, offering water and a meal. They accept and after the meal, these strangers reveal that his wife Sarah will give birth to a son. Later, the visitors are identified as angels, hence the expression, "entertaining angels unaware."

The author of Hebrews is saying, "We've been welcoming strangers since Abraham." The Jewish Christians that he was writing to---that's why the book is called Hebrews---would nod and remember the story. Because they were Jewish Christians, it also reminded them of the many laws about strangers. There are dozens of them in the Old Testament, laws like "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 23:9) He is saying, "Welcome strangers because you were once a stranger in a strange land." You know how it feels so practice hospitality.

They understood the challenge to practice hospitality from their Hebraic roots. But they also understood it from the teachings of Jesus. Practicing hospitality was the heart of Jesus' ministry. He both experienced it and extended it. As an itinerate preacher, he depended on the hospitality of others to have a place to stay. Jesus meets with the priests and with the prostitutes, the street people, and the religious elite, and somehow he's able to show them dignity. He welcomes children and eats with lepers, women, and tax collectors. He tells parables about practicing hospitality, like The Good Samaritan and the Wedding Banquet. In his last parable about "The Sheep and Goats" people are judged on whether they made strangers feel accepted, safe and welcomed. He was constantly expanding his table fellowship and suggesting that we must do the same as we practice

hospitality. We are to invite to our table the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and when you do, you will be blessed.

But it wasn't just that Jesus practiced hospitality and challenged us to do the same. Hospitality was Jesus' mission. We were strangers, estranged from God. We didn't know God; we weren't in relationship. We were wandering, lost, with no way to get home. So God sent Jesus to break down the barriers that were between us and offer us a guest room in God's home. Paul says it this way:you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." (Ephesians 2: 17a, 19) Because you were once a stranger to God and now are a friend, you are to welcome strangers, offering them the same hospitality that God offers you in Jesus.

At the center of being a Christian is hospitality. We are fellow sojourners in a strange and dangerous world. This is why Paul says, "Welcome one another therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you." (Romans 15:7) It is why Peter says, "Be hospitable to one another without complaining." (1 Peter 4:9) They join the book of Hebrews when it says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." (Hebrews 13:2a) Hospitality draws from the deepest taproots of ancient community where it was considered an essential virtue for a person of faith.

Hospitality is a fundamental trait of a Christian, an essential component of being a Christ-follower. Hospitality is making someone feel accepted, safe and welcomed.

How are we doing with this? Is it one of your virtues? It's an important question because you can tell a lot about someone's Christian walk based solely on how they treat the "other", the "other" being those who aren't like them in appearance, thought, origin, language, and orientation. When was the last time you offered true hospitality to the "other?"

Let's face it, there's a lot of rude behavior out there and way too many voices that are saying, "It's okay to be rude to strangers and aliens." In fact, there are people we look up to who regularly defame strangers and tell us we should be afraid. Much of the rhetoric in public discourse leans toward xenophobia rather than philoxenia, the love of the stranger. And when we entertain and support that rhetoric, the core Christian value of hospitality is damaged. It makes our world less Christian which is just the opposite of what our mission is.

Let me give you a challenge. Start welcoming people the way Christ welcomed you. Welcome, everyone. Practice hospitality. Open yourself up to people you wouldn't normally welcome, people who don't dress like you or

think like you or look like you. See it as an essential Christian mindset to accept and embrace people from different cultural backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds, different socio-economic backgrounds, different lifestyles, and circumstances. Welcome them in your mind so that you can welcome them physically when the opportunity arises. Practice hospitality so that when the time comes, you can practice hospitality.

“It’s too scary? Well, add this piece to the puzzle. Look at the stranger, the alien, that person who you aren’t too sure about and see them for who they are. They are someone created in God’s image, a child of God, someone like you and me who God sent Jesus to find, rescue and save. Treat them accordingly and you will discover this. They will never be the same to you. And you will never be the same.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality.” It is a Christian virtue. In a dangerous world, it makes a space and place where stories can be shared and the love of God experienced. Practice hospitality. It will make your life richer and when you do, the world will “catch you at your best.”

¹ <http://net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=INN>

² <http://www.allaboutturkey.com/silkroad.htm>

³ AL-SHORMAN, A. et al. Travel and Hospitality in Late Antiquity: A Case Study from Umm el-Jimal in Eastern Jordan. **Near Eastern Archaeology**, [s. l.], v. 80, n. 1, p. 22–28, 2017