

## Holy Hospitality

***Leviticus 19:33-34; Matthew 25:34-35;***

***Hebrews 13:2; Romans 12:13; 16:16***

***[Notes: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we use to communicate with the media team.]***

In 2001, Andersonville United Methodist Church in Andersonville, Georgia, received a certified letter from an attorney. ***[slide: church steeple]*** Enclosed was a check for \$178,000. That caught the attention of the pastor! The letter from the attorney said that he represented the estate of Robert B. Brown, who at age ninety had recently died, leaving his entire estate to Andersonville UMC. The pastor had never heard of Robert B. Brown. He called the leaders together, and none of them had ever heard of him either. He wasn't a member of the church, related to a member, or even from the community. In fact, he wasn't even from Georgia. The man was from New Jersey. They all wondered, Who was this man, and why did he leave them \$178,000 dollars? The preacher called the attorney and said, "We think there has been a mistake. Nobody here has ever heard of Robert B. Brown." The attorney chuckled and said, "I thought I might hear from you." Then he explained.

Five years earlier Mr. Brown was traveling through Georgia. He was extremely discouraged and depressed, even suicidal. He wasn't much of a churchgoing man, but it was Sunday morning, and he was desperate, so he decided to stop and visit the Andersonville church. He, like all visitors at that church, was warmly welcomed by the congregation. ***[slide: photo of people greeting one another at a church]*** Before the service began, numerous people greeted him. During the worship service, at the passing of the peace, several others greeted and welcomed him. And after the service several people talked to him, welcomed him, said they were glad he had visited, and invited him to come again soon.

Their warm hospitality lifted his spirits, and it changed his life. A year later he finalized his will. Since he had no children or family, he decided to leave his entire estate to that little church in Georgia who had so warmly welcomed him several years earlier. They were just extending hospitality, as they always did. Members and guests were always warmly welcomed at that church. It was no big deal to them. But it was a big deal for Mr. Brown. In fact, it was a life-changing experience. Their hospitality impacted Mr. Brown in a profound way, and eventually

it impacted them in a remarkable way. By the way, if you want to give our church \$178,000, we'll be happy to accept it whether you are a member or not! And you don't even have to die first! **[end slide]**

I want to talk to you today about hospitality. About receiving and welcoming persons, members or guests, who come to our church. The fact is, hospitality is a major biblical theme, as we saw in today's Scripture readings. Throughout the Bible, God commands his people over and over again to be people of hospitality. Please turn to your listening guide and let's look once again at these verses. Please read each one of them with me. **(The listening guide can be found at the end of this sermon.)**

**[slide: (church background) "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." (Lev. 19:33-34)]**

**[slide: (church background) "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for . . . I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'" (Matt. 25:34-35 NRSV)]**

**[slide: (church background) "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Heb. 13:2 NRSV)]**

**[slide: (church background) "Extend hospitality." (Rom. 12:13 NRSV)]**

**[slide: (church background) "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (Rom. 16:16 NRSV)]**

If we had time, many more biblical examples of hospitality could be reviewed. **[end slide]** Clearly, this is important to God. God expects his church to extend hospitality to all persons. So for the next few minutes I want to affirm three simple but important reasons for extending holy hospitality.

First, we extend hospitality for our sake. **[slide: (image of our church in background) 1. We extend hospitality for our sake.]** Warmly welcoming people at church helps meet our

need for human connection. One of my favorite stories tells about an atheist who attended a synagogue every Saturday for worship. Everyone at the synagogue knew that this man was an atheist, so they were confused as to why he came to worship every week. Finally, a man asked him, “Larry, everybody knows you don’t believe in God. Yet you still come to the synagogue for worship every Sabbath. Why is that?” Larry smiled and pointed to a man named Mr. Garfunkel, sitting in one of the pews. He said, “Mr. Garfunkel comes to the synagogue every week to talk to God. I come to talk to Mr. Garfunkel.” I hope you come to church every Sunday to talk to God. But I also hope you come to talk to other people—to be connected, to make friends, to be a part of a community. When we extend hospitality to others, we are in part doing it for ourselves. We are saying, “I alone am not complete. I need other people. So I come to this place to be with others.” Part of extending hospitality is for our benefit, for our sake.

Second, we extend hospitality for other’s sake. *[slide: (image of our church in background)*

**1. We extend hospitality for others’ sake.]** Every person has a need to feel welcomed and affirmed and loved by others. Therefore, when we offer hospitality to others, we are meeting important needs in their lives. Years ago, when I pastored in Arkansas, my church got into a debate over the passing of the peace. One of our adult Sunday school classes, a large class, wanted to get rid of it. They complained that it interrupted the flow of the service. They argued that since they greeted one another before and after the worship service, they didn’t need to do it during worship.

The next Sunday I visited that class and explained to them why we greet one another during our worship services. In fact, I gave them what I considered to be three compelling reasons. First, I told them, we greet one another because the Bible tells us to. In Romans 16 Paul says, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (NIV). First Peter 5:14 says, “Greet one another with a kiss of love” (NIV). There are dozens of such passages in the NT. So we pass the peace because it’s biblical. The second reason for passing the peace, I told them, is historical. Early in its history the church implemented a time of greeting in worship, and we’ve been doing it now for two thousand years. The third reason for passing the peace, I told them, is theological. I explained that the passing of the peace is a deeply theological act, a holy and sacred symbol. For one thing, it symbolizes that we are part of a community. It reminds us that we don’t come to worship God as individuals but as a community of faith, as a family.

I also noted that the passing of the peace is also a symbol of Christian hospitality. When we take time in our worship service to greet people, we are saying, in effect, that all persons are welcome in this place. Longtime members are welcome. New members are welcome. And friends, guests, and visitors are welcome. People who are like us are welcome; people who are not like us are welcome. When we pass the peace, we are saying, “All persons are welcome in the house of God.” The passing of the peace, therefore, is an important symbol of hospitality. “So,” I concluded, “we greet one another for biblical reasons, for historical reasons, and for theological reasons.”

Well I figured that completely settled it. I asked them, “Do you have any questions or comments?” “Yes,” they said, “We still don’t like it, and we want you to take it out of the service.” I told them I would think about it and visit them again the next Sunday. During the week I just about decided to drop the passing of the peace. It just didn’t seem worth the battle. As my mentor had told me, “Remember Martin, every battle is not Armageddon.” I didn’t want to pick this ditch to die in. But later that week a quiet, elderly woman from our church came to visit me. She said, “Pastor, I know there is disagreement about the greeting time in worship. But I want to speak for keeping it in. You see, my husband died many years ago, and my only son lives out west in California. Our greeting time on Sunday morning is the only time during the week that I experience human touch.”

I cried as I listened to her. Then I asked if I could tell her story to the Sunday school class. She said yes. The next Sunday I told them that story. They all cried and said, “You can keep the greeting time.” When they realized that small act of hospitality met important needs in people’s lives, they saw its value. You see, when we warmly welcome people, not just at the passing of the peace but in all we do as a church, we help meet important needs in people’s life. We help meet their need to be loved and affirmed. We help meet their need to feel welcome. We help meet their need to feel like part of a family, part of a faith community. So we extend hospitality for others’ sake.

Third, we extend hospitality for Jesus’ sake. *[slide: (image of our church in background) 1. We extend hospitality for Jesus’ sake.]* When we receive people warmly into the life of the church, especially newcomers, we please Jesus. In fact, in one of today’s texts, Jesus said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” When we offer hospitality to others, it is the same as offering hospitality to Jesus. You know that teenager who feels nerdy and left out? When we

make him feel welcome and invite him to the youth group, we are doing it to Jesus. You know that single mom with three kids in tow who is always late? When we welcome her and her children and show her where the nursery is and help with her kids, we are doing it to Jesus. You know that recently divorced man who feels out of place at church? When we welcome him and invite him to be a part of our Sunday school class, we are doing it to Jesus. You know that senior adult woman whose husband died and whose kids have scattered and now sits alone in the pew? When we reach out to her in love and hospitality and sit with her and talk with her, we are doing it to Jesus. **[end slide]**

The Bible tells us to “extend hospitality.” For our sake. For other’s sake. And for Jesus’ sake. One of the things that most excites me about our church is that we are making progress in this area. We are becoming a church that practices hospitality. We still have a way to go, but we are headed in the right direction. One of my dreams for our church is that we will become a congregation of radical hospitality. My dream is that when people come here, both old-timers and new-timers, they will feel radically welcomed and greeted and loved and appreciated. My dream is that we will learn to practice holy and radical hospitality.

A few weeks ago I read a book by a Roman Catholic priest. In the book, the priest tells about a letter that came to his church. The letter was addressed to “Harry, the Usher.” The letter was from an elderly woman in the congregation named Gert. She wanted the letter forwarded to Harry, the head usher for church’s ten o’clock mass. I’d like to read the letter to you.

Dear Harry:

I’m sorry I don’t know your last name, but then you don’t know mine. I just know you as Harry the usher. Anyway Harry, I’m writing to ask a favor. I don’t know the priest too well, but somehow I feel close to you. I don’t know how you got to know my first name, but every Sunday morning you smile and greet me by name, and we exchange a few words: how bad the weather is, how much you like my hat, and how I was late on a particular Sunday. I just wanted to say thank you for your hospitality. Thank you for taking the time for remembering an old lady, for the smiles, for your consideration, for your thoughtfulness. Now for my favor. I am dying, Harry. My husband has been dead for sixteen years and the kids are scattered. It is very important to me that when they bring me to church for the last time, you will be standing there in the front entrance. It wouldn’t seem right if you didn’t say, “Hello, Gert. Good to see

you.” If you are there Harry, I feel assured that your warm hospitality will be duplicated in my new home in heaven.

With love and gratitude,  
Gert

*(William Bausch, Telling Stories, Compelling Stories [New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991], 94–95).*

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## **LISTENING GUIDE**

### ***Holy Hospitality***

#### ***Old Testament Reading***

“When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev. 19:33-34 NIV)

#### ***Gospel Reading***

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for . . . I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matt. 25:34-35 NRSV)

#### ***Epistle Readings***

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Heb. 13:2 NRSV)

“Extend hospitality.” (Rom. 12:13 NRSV)

“Greet one another with a holy kiss.” (Rom. 16:16 NRSV)

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