

“The Art of Being a Neighbor: Radial Hospitality”

(Heb. 13:1-3)

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Introduction.

How many friends would you say you have? (And I’m not talking about the number of friends you have on Facebook. I mean actual real friends.) Twenty? Twelve? Five? Two? How about *none*? According to a recent survey, 22 percent of Millennials say they have no friends at all. Zero. Zilch. Nada. Twenty-seven percent said they had “no close friends,” and 25 percent even said they don’t even have any acquaintances. Nearly one-third of those surveyed reported they feel lonely. In the study many Gen Xers and Baby Boomers also reported feeling the very same things, but at lower percentages. No matter how you slice it, this study reveals that loneliness is a big problem in America today.¹

Other studies that have been conducted in recent years indicate that as a person ages they battle loneliness more and more. It’s not uncommon for 70- and 80- and 90-year-olds to also feel very lonely, especially as friends and loved ones pass away. But the findings on Millennials I must say are startling. Why is it that fully one-fifth of 20- and 30-somethings feel like they have *no* friends at all? They are the most digitally-connected generation in history. However, it appears they are also the loneliest.

Do you battle loneliness? Have you had an experience recently when you felt really alone? I believe there is something that can help address the problem of loneliness in our world today, and it’s the ministry of hospitality in the church of Jesus Christ. Let me explain what I mean.

I. Hospitality in the Bible.

The Bible talks a lot about hospitality. In the passage we’ve read this morning, the author of Hebrews makes a reference to the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah and how they extended hospitality to some unexpected guests. It’s a reference to a story in Genesis 18 where Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent one day when the text says that he *“looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, ‘If I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way.’”*

Who were these the people, and why did they come to visit Abraham and Sarah? Later on in chapter 19 we read that two of these individuals, who are then clearly identified as angels, traveled to the city of Sodom and visited Abraham's nephew Lot. It appears they were angels of God sent by the Lord for a specific task to be His messengers, and they appeared in the form of human beings. Abraham evidently didn't realize who he was talking to at the beginning, and he simply offered them hospitality in a kind and gracious way.

The ministry of hospitality is emphasized over and over in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, Job said, "*The sojourner has not lodged in my street; I have opened my doors to the traveler*" (Job 31:32). The prophet Elisha enjoyed the hospitality of a wealthy woman who lived in the town of Shunem, and whenever he passed that way he would eat a meal in her home. Eventually, she and her husband built a guest room for the prophet on the roof of their house. We also read in the book of Acts that in the early church day after day believers gather together for worshipped in the Temple, and they ate together in each other's homes. And the Bible says there was not a needy one among them (Act. 2:46).

The apostle Paul urged the Christians in Rome to be "*given to hospitality*" (12:13). The apostle John wrote two epistles which centered on this theme (I and II John). And in the epistle to the Hebrews which we've read today we're given the exhortation, "*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it*" (13:2).

Every follower of Jesus is urged to practice hospitality and to reach beyond their comfort zone in order to show the love and grace of Jesus Christ to other people. It can be as simple as inviting the youth group to come to your house for ice cream, or you can practice hospitality by asking someone you've just met to go to lunch. You can take a meal to a new family who just moved into your neighborhood, or you can be a host family to a Winston-Salem Fellow or an intern in our church. After the worship service ends today make it a point to talk to two people you don't know before you talk to anyone with whom you're already acquainted. In a myriad of ways you can extend hospitality to another person, and the Bible teaches that there is great value whenever we do it.

II. The Difference between Friendliness and Hospitality.

There's a big difference between being friendly and extending hospitality. Being warm and friendly doesn't demand a whole lot of you, but hospitality means making a seat for someone at the table or time for them in your schedule. It requires some sacrifice which involves rearranging your priorities and how you spend your time, and it also includes developing an eye for the stranger and making room for the newcomer.

Some people are more naturally given to hospitality than others. For some people it's easy for them to open their home, invite new people into their lives, or even break into a new circle of friends. However, not everyone is an extrovert, and for most of us it takes a whole lot for us to put ourselves out there. We're afraid of rejection, or we're really not sure our efforts will be welcome. But we can't let our personalities get in the way of living out the demands of the gospel, and each of us is invited by God to join Him on His mission of love and engage in the ministry of hospitality.

I've observed that most people desire to build community, and they try to develop a group of friends. And when they get that established and put in place, for most people it doesn't naturally occur to them that they need to make room for outsiders. It's not that they intend to be exclusive. It's just that they've already got their group – they've got their peeps, and it's easy to become inwardly focused and unintentionally exclusive if we're not careful.

Let me give you an example. When Lorie and I moved to take a new job as an associate pastor in another church many years ago, we were very warmly welcomed by the people of that congregation. Everyone was so friendly, and the early days of our time there were filled with many gestures of kindness and welcome.

However, after we'd been there for a while we noticed that it was more difficult than we expected to actually break into the established circles of friendship. Most of the people had been in that community for a number of years, and their friendships were pretty well set. No one was rude to us, and they didn't intentionally exclude us. It's just that they didn't make room in their lives for a new friendship. That's when I realized there's a big difference between being welcoming and friendly and truly extending hospitality. As I said before, hospitality makes a seat at the table and time in your schedule. It opens your circle of friends and makes room for the newcomer.

III. The Radical Nature of Hospitality.

If you study hospitality in the Bible closely, you'll discover that it is actually quite radical. The Greek word that is translated "hospitality" is the word *philozenia*. It comes from two Greek words. The first *phileo* means "love," and the second *zenia* means "stranger." The word literally means "the love of strangers." Christian hospitality involves welcoming and loving strangers. In our day when many in the world are urging us to be afraid of strangers and those who are different from us or come from somewhere else in the world, I find it both arresting and convicting that the Bible counters that notion and urges the followers of Jesus to actually seek out strangers and to love them.

I'm so proud of the way our church has welcomed the Mustafa family to Winston-Salem and into our congregation. Many of you have been involved in helping them get settled and make their way in their new lives here in America. But only about 50 people in our church have actually been a part of the Good Neighbor Team. What about the rest of us? What are we doing to welcome the stranger in our lives? We can't leave it to others to fulfill this calling in Christ. It's up to each of us to be the hands and feet of Jesus ourselves.

I believe that many times Jesus comes to us in the form of a stranger, just like God visited Abraham and Sarah in our passage today. But often times we're too busy or too tired or too afraid of making a mistake that we either refuse Him altogether, or we treat Him so badly that He passes by unobserved to carry to someone else the blessing that He would have left with us if we had only been willing. Jesus told His disciples that whenever they gave a cup of cold water, or provided clothing, or visited someone who would be considered "the least of these" by the world's standards, they were doing it for Him (see Mt. 25).

Perhaps more than any person in our generation, Mother Teresa learned and lived this truth. She always saw Jesus Himself in the poor and dying people to whom she ministered in Calcutta. She once said,

"My secret is quite simple. I pray and through my prayer I become one in love with Christ, and see that praying to Him is to love Him, and that means for me to fulfill His words. Remember the words of Saint Matthew's Gospel, 'I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me....My poor ones in the world's slums are like the suffering Christ. In them God's Son lives and dies, and through them God shows me His true face.... If we pray, we will believe. If we believe, we will love. If we love, we will serve. Only then can we put our love for God into living action through services to Christ who comes to us in the distressing disguise of the Poor.'"2

Now, none of us is Mother Teresa. I'll grant you that. And I don't mean to hold her up as the standard of Christian hospitality. That's a pretty high bar. But I do believe that all of us have a calling to follow her example in reaching out in the name of Jesus to the stranger in our midst and to offer them the kindness and grace of our Lord. And I believe that in doing so we will actually be offering it to Christ Himself. And perhaps we will entertain angels without even knowing it, just like Abraham and Sarah did.

What can you this do fall to be more welcoming to the stranger? How is God calling you to extend yourself and step out and take a risk?

IV. The Hospitality of Jesus.

Ultimately, the biggest reason we should want to grow in the ministry of hospitality is because of the hospitality of Jesus. If you think about Christ's life, there were so many occasions when He extended hospitality, and Jesus was always inviting people to do things. He walked by the Sea of Galilee and said to Peter, James and John, "Come and follow Me." Someone asked Him, "Where you going?" and Jesus replied, "Come and see." Jesus said, "*Come to me all you who are weary and experiencing heavy burdens, and I will give you rest*" (Mt. 11:28). He welcomed little children when others wanted to shoo them away, and the last night Jesus was with His disciples He shared a meal with them which we continue to celebrate today as the Lord's Supper. Jesus' had a ministry of hospitality.

Christ also kept an eye out for those who were on the margins. He noticed Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree and said He wanted to have dinner with the tax collector that night. He struck up a conversation with the woman at the well in a Samaritan village, and He offered her the living water of salvation. And He told his followers that in heaven there would be many rooms for them in His heavenly home, and that He was going away to make it ready for them so they could join Him one day.

Jesus invites you and me to join Him in His radical ministry of hospitality today. The apostle Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans, "*Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you*" (15:7). That's why we put ourselves out there and move beyond our comfort zones. That's why we develop an eye for the stranger and the newcomer. It's because Jesus welcomed us into His kingdom. He made a seat at the table of communion for you and me, and He made time for us in order to accomplish our salvation. When we were on the outside looking in, when we were completely lost because of our brokenness and sin, Jesus made a way for us through His sacrificial love. Thanks be to God that Christ made a seat for us at His Table and time for us in His schedule. How can we do the same for others?

Conclusion.

I started this sermon by talking about the problem of loneliness in America today. This week Freshmen will begin to arrive in town to attend Wake Forest University, the School for the Arts, and other colleges and universities in our city. Or perhaps you're getting ready to go off to school somewhere else. I remember the first day I went to grad school many years ago. I had driven 1,000 miles from my home in Atlanta to the north shore of Boston and enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I didn't know a soul when I arrived, and I was a long way from home. Having never lived for any length of time outside the South, I remember sitting in my dorm room that first evening wondering what I had gotten

myself into. People there spoke with a weird accent. “Paaark your caaar in the Haaaarvard yaaaard!” I felt so out of place and alone.

Just then, there was a knock at my door. When I opened it, I saw two upper-classmen I had met very briefly when I was unloading my car and checking in - Mike Goderz, who was the RA on my floor, and his friend Jim Thorpe. They said, “Hey, we’re going to Nick’s Roast Beef for dinner. You ever been there? No? Oh, you’ve gotta come with us. It’s the best sandwich in the world!”

We got into Mike’s car, and they drove me to Nick’s. There I ate the best sandwich I have ever put in my mouth before or since. We talked over dinner, and they peppered me with questions about my life. It felt like they were truly interested in getting to know me. They seemed so mature, so far along in their walks with Christ, and I was blown away by their warmth and kindness.

Then they drove me to Singing Beach nearby, and I remember standing on the sand looking out at the great expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. I prayed silently to God and I said, “Thanks, Lord, for bringing me here to Boston. And thanks for Mike and Jim and their generous hospitality. I don’t feel so alone anymore. And thanks for Nick’s Roast Beef! That’s the best sandwich I’ve ever eaten!”

Maybe you’ve got a story like that – a time when you were invited to attend a special event, or you were included in a new circle of friends. Do you remember how it felt, the sense of belonging, and what it meant to be included? All of us long to be in community, but nowadays it’s hard to find sometimes, isn’t it? We all feel alone at times, and that’s true whether we’re a Millennial or not. It’s one of the reasons why a missional church like ours needs to extend the ministry hospitality all the more. When you come right down to it, it’s the art of being a neighbor. Amen.

¹ Source: Brian Resnick, “22 percent of millennials say they have ‘no friends,’” *Vox Newsfeed*, August 1, 2019.

²Source unknown.