

“ENTERTAINING ANGELS”

(Hebrews 13:2)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-12-07]

--I--

[GIVE BRIEF CAVEAT: “Though we welcome our first-time worshipers today, this message is intended primarily as a challenge for our members and regular guests. Hopefully this will give those of you who are guests a glimpse of the kind of church we here at East Cobb are striving to be just for you.”]

1. Read Text: Hebrews 13:2 and Pray.

2. [TELL STORIES OF INHOSPITABLE WELCOMES...]

A--A family with an infant child walks through the front door of a church for the first time on a Sunday morning.

1--And though they see several people with nametags on standing near the door, those people are busy talking, and don't notice the family come in.

2--After wandering around for a short while looking for the nursery, they finally find it and drop off their child before coming back to the sanctuary for worship.

B--In another setting, a new church member couple visits several Sunday School classes and groups over the course of 2-3 months, trying to find a place to fit in.

1--But after leaving church on more than one Sunday almost at the point of tears because they felt rejected and not included,...

2--...they reluctantly decide that that church is not the place for them, and begin searching for a new church home.

C--A new family starts attending church Wednesday night supper.

1--They pay their money and stand in line, but no one speaks to them, except a server.

2--They get their food and sit down at an empty table, but no one sits with them.

3--So, they sit and eat alone while everyone else fellowships with people they seem to already know -- they come back and try it again the next week, and the next.

4--But after sitting by themselves for 3 weeks in a row, they decide to NOT come back to Wednesday night suppers any more.

3. Can you blame them? I mean, how would YOU feel if you were in these people's shoes and received the kind of reception they did? Awkward? Hurt? Left out? Like you didn't matter?<sup>1</sup>

A--Of course, we here today might say, “*Oh, that's so sad that that happens at some churches. But, we here at East Cobb are a friendly church. That wouldn't happen here!*”

B--Unfortunately, though,... it did! The stories I just told are true experiences which I've found out have happened here at OUR church.

C–Now, I don’t tell these stories to make us feel bad or to “shake my finger” at anyone.

1–No. The sad truth is that MOST churches tend to think of themselves as “*friendly churches*” (after all, have you ever been anywhere that claimed to be an “unfriendly church”?) – well, we’re usually right if by friendly we mean “*friendly to each other.*”

2–What we’ve got to understand, however, is that visitors and guests often have very DIFFERENT perceptions because, unfortunately, these are exactly the types of experiences that they have at churches all over the world!

4. Of course, this is so odd, considering the fact that we as Christians are supposed to be KNOWN for our hospitality.

A–In today’s scripture from Hebrews 13:2, the writer there instructs his Christian readers, “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.*”<sup>2</sup>

B–In the Bible, hospitality refers to the receiving and entertaining of strangers (“sojourners”) into one’s own home as honored guests, and the practice of providing them with food, shelter, and protection while there.<sup>3</sup>

5. This was the case throughout the Old and New Testament, and thus became a hallmark of the early Christian church.

A–Unfortunately, many churches and many Christians have forgotten that this is at the very core of our being, and have instead relegated “hospitality” to being the responsibility of the preacher or some official “greeters” (like we have here).

B–And yet, what would happen in our church (or *any* churches) if ALL church members saw themselves as “ministers of hospitality” / “ambassadors of *God’s* hospitality”?

C–What if we began to see ourselves through the eyes of the many guests we have in our midst each week?

1–If so, I believe it would revolutionize our fellowship together.

2–[I mentioned last week that] more people visit churches for the first time in the Fall than at any other time of year.

3–Well, for that reason we need to be ready to offer genuine, Christian hospitality to the many who will be worshiping with us here for the first time and becoming a part of our fellowship over the next few months.<sup>4</sup>

6. So, to help us with that task here at East Cobb UMC, I'd like to offer **Three Keys to Christian Hospitality** – three words you and I need to remember and practice as we head “back to school” this Fall.

–II–

7. The first key to hospitality is the word **AWARENESS** -- referring to our need to first be aware of and sensitive to the fact that there ARE always guests present in our midst.

A--In the preface to one of his books, author Andrew Weeks once wrote, “*I have attended churches where I felt that if I had died in the pew, no one would have noticed*”<sup>5</sup> – have you ever been somewhere like this... where you felt like a “nobody”?

B--You see, if we want to “*not neglect to show hospitality to strangers*” as Paul says in today’s scripture, then we *first* need to be aware that there *are* “strangers” (or “guests” as I prefer to call them) in our midst!

1--Did you know that on any given Sunday during the year here at East Cobb UMC, we have on the average of 3-4 first time worshipers *each and every Sunday*?

2--What’s more is that in addition to those *first* time worshipers, we have on average of 10-12 persons who are “Repeat Guests” *each and every Sunday* – people who’re worshipping regularly with us but have yet to become members.

C--You see, how can we welcome and show hospitality to others if we don’t take the time to first recognize and be aware that they are even HERE!<sup>6</sup>

9. A second key to hospitality is the word **CONVERSATION**, referring to the fact that when we’re at church, rather than just speaking to those people who we *already know*, we should instead begin by speaking to those who we DON’T already know.<sup>7</sup>

A--When my family and I were on vacation in Florida several years ago, I attended a local UMC for worship one Sunday, & I was fascinated by something they called the “3 minute rule.”

B--The way it worked was this: before or after the worship service, all members were expected to take 3 minutes to welcome people they *didn’t* know *before* greeting long-time friends or family.

C--Now, we might *think* that we have a “friendly church” -- but just think how much *more* “friendly” it would be if we here at East Cobb would take up that challenge today: that before we leave, we’d take 3 minutes to speak to and get to know people we *don’t* know *before* speaking to our friends or family members.

10. A final word of hospitality is **INCLUSION**, referring to the fact that Christian hospitality requires us to *include* new members, guests, and newcomers in our activities, in our conversations, and even in and through our body language.

A–Did you know that when we talk in front of strangers about subjects that they’re not privy to, or when we circle up with our backs to others, it signals to them (unintentional or not) “*We’re having a private group meeting here that doesn’t include you. Please stay out!*”

B– Inclusion, then, is a vital part of hospitality, because in the words of one author, “[*The one*] who practices hospitality [*by including others*] entertains God himself.”<sup>8</sup>

1–Not only that, but I believe our ability to include others is one indicator of how spiritually mature we are!

2–Erwin Lutzer once wrote, “*Hospitality is a test for godliness because those who are selfish do not like strangers (especially needy ones) to intrude upon their private lives. They prefer their own friends who share their life-style. Only the [spiritually] humble have the necessary resources to give of themselves to those who could never give of themselves in return.*”<sup>9</sup>

C–So then, to offer Christian hospitality means that we *include* guests in our lives.

–III–

11. You see, the bottom line for all of this is that the creation of a welcoming and hospitable environment here at our church is not just the responsibility of a few persons.

A--No. It begins at the parking lot curb and continues in the hearts of each of us who are members or regular guests of this congregation.

B–It involves... –**AWARENESS** of the presence and needs of guests in our midst;  
–**CONVERSATION** – that is: US taking time to *speak* to them;  
–**INCLUSION** – which means: US *including* them in our activities, conversations, and body language.

C–You see, when we as a church welcome guests in our midst, we are in fact often “entertaining angels” without even knowing it, and we are often even welcoming Jesus himself!

D–So as we head into Fall, I challenge us to “entertain angels” through our offering of hospitality.

12. [INVITATION... Today my challenge is for us to each become a “living altar” for someone else to experience the power and presence of Jesus through *our* hospitality by through **taking 3 minutes to welcome people before/after church EACH Sunday -- If you’re willing to do this, I invite you to step forward to the altar as we sing....**] then PRAY FOR THESE & OTHERS.

### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Another example: on a Sunday morning during worship, a newcomer stands up during the greeting time to greet receive greeting from others. But because she’s sitting on a empty row, somehow no one thinks to take time to take time to walk over and shake hands. Consequently, while everyone around her seems to be having a great time greeting each other, she feels lonely and left out.

2. In Romans 12:13 we find the apostle Paul giving us a similar admonition: “*Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*”

3. In fact, from the earliest Bible times, this practice of hospitality was *not* simply a matter of having “good manners” or upholding certain traditions/customs, but was considered a *sacred duty* that *everyone* (especially people of faith) were expected to observe – in some cases it was a duty even *more* sacred than some written laws! The practice originally grew out of the needs of nomadic life: since public inns were rare, travelers had to depend on the kindness of others to provide food, shelter, and protection, and had every right to expect those things (even if the one providing it was an enemy) [See the article “Hospitality” by Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan in the Holman Bible Dictionary; See Also the entry “Hospitality” by J.L. Burkhardt in the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible].

As a result, the Old and New Testaments are full of scriptures which not only instruct God’s people to offer hospitality to others [See, for example, God’s specific commands for the Israelites to love the strangers as themselves (Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:18-19; Deut. 23:16-17), and to look after their welfare (Deut. 24:17-22). Also see New Testament instructions to this effect found in Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:10; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:8-9)], but also of examples of God’s people doing just this [Consider, for example, the Old Testament stories of Abraham and the three visitors (Gen. 18:1-8), Lot and the two angels (Gen. 19:1-8), Abraham’s servant at Nahor (Gen. 24:17-33), Reuel and Moses (Ex. 2:20), Manoah and the angel (Judg. 13:15), Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:10-11), and Elisha and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:8-11), and the New Testament stories of Jesus with his disciples (See Matt. 8:20; Luke 7:36; 9:2-5; 10:4-11)].

4. After all, “*we can only make a first impression once,*” and so that first impression of our church needs to be one in which we as God’s people welcome our visitors and guests as God would welcome them.

5. Weeks in his book Welcome!, p. vii, cited in the UMC’s “Igniting Ministry” resource materials, p. 1.2.

6. To acknowledge that they are NOT “flys on the wall,” NOT here by accident, and are probably NOT “just church shopping.” No. If they came here from a previous church, it was for a reason. If they haven’t been to church for a while, then SOMETHING spiritual moved them to get out and try one! Be aware that people visit churches because (like all of us) they have spiritual needs that they are trying to have met. So then, Hospitality starts with being aware of the presence of others, along with being attuned to their needs and hopes.

7. In a “Dear Abbey” column a while back, singer John Charles Thomas told about his 3-year survey on hospitality in churches. In it he wrote that out of the 195 churches he visited, he was spoken to in only *one* of them by someone other than an official greeter, and that was “*to ask me to move my feet*” (Cited by “Eutychus and His Kin,” Christianity Today, June 3, 1977).

8. Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry# 5961. See also Matthew 25:31-46, where scripture tells us that when we entertain strangers we are entertaining Jesus himself.

9. Erwin W. Lutzer, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry#5957.