

“Party Planning #2: Welcome to the Party!”

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Scripture: Romans 12:9-13

Show video clip, “I Am A Stranger,” from sermonspice.com (2:29 Minutes)

Have you ever thought about why guests come to East Cobb UMC and how they feel when they come? Most are here because they were invited – a direct invitation from you or a written invitation on our website, on our sign, or someplace else. Others come because they are looking for more meaning and purpose in life, and the Holy Spirit leads them here. Still others are curious. Perhaps they responded to the call of God on their lives once, only to be hurt by the church or someone in it. Now they have decided to test the waters again, still very afraid that the horrible reputation the church has for being judgmental will make them a victim again. But most are here because you have a relationship with them and have invited them because of that relationship. Some are just attending, coming to worship or study; for Wednesday night supper; to bring their children to school; for scouts, Y-Camp, Narcotics Anonymous, Brazilian Ministry, Meals-on-Wheels. The invitation is critical, as we saw last week. But what do we do when they come? What *should* we do when they come?

Today we continue a three-part sermon series entitled “Party Planning,” taking a look at (1) how we invite others to God’s Kingdom (the Party); (2) how we extend hospitality to them when they come; and (3) how we can effectively incorporate them into the Body of Christ – the Church. Our focus today is on welcoming those who have responded to the invitation. Some of us do that very well. Others do not. Few of us are very realistic about how effective we really are.

Scripture has abundant examples of hospitality, many of which are listed in the endnotes to the sermon transcript available in the Narthex or online at www.eastcobbumc.org. Paul tells us in Romans 12:9-13 that hospitality is not an option. Sincere welcoming and compassion for others has no acceptable substitute.

Very early in my ministry, I was appointed to a church which published proudly on its bulletin cover these words: “The Friendly Church.” As nice as that sounds, it sounded a bit like “Honest Ed’s Used Cars.” If you have to advertise your good points, maybe they aren’t as good as you think they are. Besides, who would dream of connecting with an “unfriendly church?” To be fair, that congregation was convinced that they were welcoming and friendly, yet outsiders did not feel welcomed when they came. It took a lot of effort and some painful self analysis to reach the point where we could welcome others as Jesus would, and welcome them in the spirit and love of Christ.

Obstacles to Effective Hospitality

- (1) Our Facility – All of us who have been here a while know where things are and have become accustomed to the facility’s imperfections. We know we have long since run out of usable storage space, and all of our classrooms are in use every Sunday at 9:45. Much has been done in recent years to update and enhance our facility, and much more is planned. We need signage to help people navigate the

campus more easily. We need to leave parking spaces open near the entrances to all of our services so that guests do not have to wonder where to park. But what about the person who arrives at 9:40 AM on Sunday to attend HeartLight Worship? Is someone there to assure that they find the Fellowship Hall? Is someone always there to direct young parents to the Nursery? Have we made a point of telling people formally and informally that every level of our facility can be reached without climbing even one step?

I attended a Conference Committee meeting this week at a church in Atlanta I had never visited before. There are only 12 of us on the Committee, yet there was someone at the entrance and in the hallway to welcome us, tell us where rest rooms were, and direct us to the room where our meeting was. And this is not a large church. Do you think I was impressed? Do you think I was more at ease about being in an unfamiliar facility? Of course I was, and I won't forget it.

We know from the story of Jesus' encounter with woman at the well in John 4:5-26 that the *place* of worship should not be important as long as we worship the Lord in "Spirit and in Truth." And even though the place is not so important to God, we know that the condition and maintenance of this facility and the ease with which people can find their way can determine whether people stay long enough to enter into relationship with us and God.

- (2) Silence – One of the most obvious obstacles to extending Christian hospitality is silence. Many of us do not know what to say, so we say nothing. Our silence is often interpreted as indifference at best and unfriendliness at worst. And who wants to be a part of an unfriendly church. We have great reasons for not speaking to people we do not know: I don't know what to say. I may come on too strong. It is not my job to do that. I'm not the greeter today! The pastors will welcome them. Extending Biblical hospitality is not a social event, and it is everyone's responsibility. It is a key part of the process whereby people come into a relationship with Jesus Christ. And we must get it right! YOUR opportunity to speak and begin dialogue and relationship may be the only chance a person will offer us to show them true Christian hospitality. Are we missing the boat? Are we engaging people enough to get them involved? Too often, they drop in for a few weeks, then disappear. We can and must do a better job of at least sending them forth knowing that we care and have Christian love in our hearts for them. The writer of Hebrews 13 tells us not to forget to entertain strangers, for in so doing we entertain angels (and we should add, Christ himself).
- (3) Cultural Differences – We tend to be less welcoming to those we perceive to be "different" from us. The classic illustration for this is the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 29: 29-37 where everyone who logically should have provided help did not, but the help was provided by the Samaritan – the person whose presence would have otherwise been unwelcomed. Remember that, throughout Jesus' ministry, he focused on those whom Jewish society frowned upon and avoided. He was criticized for his associations. We may be, too, but such criticism should affirm our efforts to reach those whose circumstances are different and relate to them so that we can offer them Christ. The unspoken question on many of our minds as we expand our ministries and draw others into

our presence is, “Who belongs here and who doesn’t?” That simply is a question that has no place in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone has a place here.

- (4) Fear of Being Ineffective – In our pluralistic society, truth has become relative, and people look for the best faith options without regard to denomination or theology. Many younger people have no difficulty in holding what many of us would consider contradictory beliefs at the same time (e.g., the value of human life AND the right to an abortion). When truth is circumstantial and decisions are based on the best of competing demands, it is difficult for us to know what to say. Rather than risking offending someone, we speak words of pretense and politeness that are as hollow when received as they were when they were spoken.

Remember in Exodus 3 how Moses offered every excuse he could think of for NOT doing what God had asked him to do, and some of the excuses were pretty good by our standards. God was not impressed, but simply asked Moses to be faithful and let God take care of the rest. We can borrow the same phrase from Nike for welcoming that Brian used in relation to inviting last week: Just Do It! If your heart is filled with the Holy Spirit, you will know what to say, and God will use your words. You just have to be faithful.

- (5) Lack of Knowledge – Many of us do not reach out to others to invite or welcome them simply because we lack an adequate understanding of the Christian faith and fear that we cannot represent Christ well if questions of faith arise. Please do not think that anyone should have all the answers. We are not called to be Biblical scholars, but we are called to know and follow Christ. His simple message was to love God and love others (Luke 10:25-28). If we do that, we build relationships in which we can grow in faith together.

By the way, one of the great tools we have for growing in our faith is Disciple Bible Studies. This year, we are offering two units of Disciple I, Disciple II, and Christian Believer (a study of 30 doctrines of the church). Many people new to the church have found relationship and growth in these classes. All Disciple classes are still open, so pick up an orange flier [in the Narthex or in the back] and make Disciple a priority for you for the next year.

Develop A Welcoming Mindset

As Christians we must understand that our faith is increasingly alien to the society we move around in every day and the society encountered by our guests. There must be something refreshing and different about the experience they have here, and it must be experienced on the first visit with us. We should seek for the “WOW” factor in all we do to get the attention of the guests and encourage them to stay long enough to develop a relationship with us and God.

“When a Guest comes, Christ comes.” This tradition of hospitality is derived from the Rule of St. Benedict. It simply means that when we receive others, we should do so as if Christ himself has come. As the video at the beginning of the service illustrated, those who choose to come among us do so with a multitude of expectations, fears, and

uncertainties, and when we fail to meet them in a gracious and welcoming way, it may be because of our fears and uncertainties.

Extending hospitality – welcoming others - is the unique privilege of every Christian, and it is the essential way to encourage others toward a relationship with Christ. Wesley said, “Offer them Christ.” But before that has any meaning, we have to offer ourselves. You have no doubt heard the saying, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” We can go through welcoming motions and protocols, engaging in pretense and politeness. And we are good at it! But it does not make people feel welcomed at the party! God calls us to sincere and genuine love that goes far beyond pretense and politeness. Genuine love requires concentration and effort. No one has the capacity to personally express love to every one who responds to the invitation, but together, we can.

The world is a broken place with all kinds of problems, and the church exists not only to address the problems of the world, but also to include all people as a part of the solution. We have a responsibility to welcome and lift up all of God’s people. Our goal should be nothing less than to create an environment here that personifies the highest ideals of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.”

I want to suggest some ways this morning that you can become more involved in the welcoming and hospitality ministry of the church:

- (1) Smile! If you are having a bad day, get over it. God still needs your best today!
- (2) Take time to really see people. We are often so hurried that we breeze by people, and they misread our focus on other things as lack of concern for them.
- (3) Introduce yourself to others. Look for people you do not know – whether members or not – and introduce yourself to them. Some of the anonymity we complain about is self-imposed. We must make the effort to get to know those who seek a relationship with Christ who has redeemed us. Find and introduce yourself to one person you do not know or know well every week.
- (4) Ask people how they are, and really mean it!
- (5) Look for ways to help others feel more comfortable and more at ease.
- (6) Wear your nametag. If you don’t have one, we will get you a new one.
- (7) Volunteer to be a greeter.
- (8) Volunteer to help Beacon Ministries welcome those who are guests with us for the first time.
- (9) Pray

Biblical hospitality is possible only when we are able to love as Christ loves. The warm caring welcome we long to experience from others, and the welcome we are called to share with others, is born of the presence of Love, the Holy Spirit, in your life – a presence that empowers us to just do it!

Prayer

End Notes:

“I AM A VISITOR” from sermons spice.com – Some of the thoughts and feelings that are very real to guests:

I’m scared, but I’m trying not to show it.
I don’t know what to do.
I expect something religious, but I’m not sure what.
I’m not sure what is expected of me.
Please introduce yourself to me.
Please don’t introduce yourself to me.
I hope this is a friendly church but not too aggressive.
I’m skeptical of giving money to the church.
The concept of loving God is very unsettling to me.
I am concerned that you will judge me.
In the real world, Christians have a horrible reputation for being judgmental.
The Bible is very intimidating.
I have placed my children in your child care, and that makes me nervous.
This is a huge risk for me.
I just want you to know that I am here.
I’m here!

Hospitality commanded: Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9

Rom. 12:13 Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

1Pet. 4:9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Hospitality required in ministers: 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8

1Tim. 3:2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Titus 1:8 Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

Hospitality to be shown to strangers: Heb. 13:2

Heb. 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hospitality to be shown to the poor: Isa. 58:7; Luke 14:13

Is. 58:7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Luke 14:13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,

Hospitality to be given to enemies: 2 Kings 6:22, 23; Rom. 12:20

2Kings 6:22 ¶ “Do not kill them,” he answered. “Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.”

2Kings 6:23 So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had

finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory. Rom. 12:20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Encouragement to be hospitable: Luke 14:14; Heb. 13:2
Luke 14:14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."
Heb. 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hospes venit, Christus venit. Latin meaning, "When a guest comes, Christ comes." Rule of St. Benedict.