

It's A Beautiful Life: Living In, Living Out

"Neighbored"

Text: 3 John 1-12

11-6-16



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

"Has anyone shown up in your life unexpectedly, as of late? What was your initial response: risky involvement or fearful retreat?"

"As you consider extending hospitality to another, is there a way that you might make the encounter more personal and less transactional?"

"What evidence is there in my life (e.g. schedule, relationships, routines) that I am spacious and welcoming? What unhealthy assumptions and prejudices might God be calling me to confront and abandon in order to better receive others for /with him?"

"What kind of God are you offering to those you encounter? Is he hospitable and caring? Is he simply ready with a handout or is he committed to incarnational restoration?"

"When is the last time that you were actually willing to receive the hospitality of others? Did you find it difficult? If so, why?"

"How can I use the resources available to me (home, fridge, bedroom) to make others feel as if they belong? That they are not alienated or strange?"

"Who in your life appears lonely and alienated? Is there a way that you might respond in order to make them feel at home with you? Safe with you?"

Teaching Notes...

I think in our big themes, we have, in a sense, been asking the question, *"What would it look like to be the people of God in culture and context (time and place), and to adopt and practice certain rhythms of grace which turn us toward God (repentance), demonstrates to the world that God is "real" (confession) and invites them to trust another story for their lives (faith)?"*

It is about our "flourishing"; about "becoming" the humans we were always meant to be.

We are most fully human when...

... we are centered in our status as the beloved,

... we are functioning out of a place of gratitude rather than obligation.

... our responses to God are better characterized as “compelling” rather than “obligatory”.

... we notice the pain of the world and are willing to meet people there rather than attempt to avoid/ignore them.

... we link ourselves to the needs of our ‘*near ones*’ and learn how to serve in ways which lend themselves to “shalom” [wholeness].

So, one of the themes/practices which we find permeating both the Old and New Covenants (testaments) is this idea of “**hospitality**”. Now, immediately, we assume that we know what that means, because we have an entire industry and career path designated toward just such efforts.

Hospitality is widely interpreted, but at its essence, it means: “*the practice of offering precious financial resources in exchange for being overlooked, ignored and disdained.*” You’re welcome. Gratuity is already added!

Hospitality has always identified us as a people living within a particular story and has informed and formed the ways in which we were to live out that story in the world.

Leviticus 19:33-34 “*Do not take advantage of foreigners who live among you in your land. Treat them like native-born Israelites, and love them as you love yourself. Remember, that you were once foreigners living in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.*”

In the NT, Paul says, “... *you are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with all of God’s holy people. You are members of God’s family*” (Ephesians 2).

God anchors their understanding of hospitality in their own story of alienation and welcome; that they were the stranger, they were the alien, the ‘other’, but God had brought them in, extended care and provision, changed the relationship.

Essentially, if you’re looking for ideas for a festive table-scape or “etiquette tips” for entertaining, Martha Stewart is your best bet. But, if you are looking for an example of hospitality, Jesus (although often displaying horrendous table manners) embodies it most beautifully.

The Greek term that is often translated into the English term “hospitality” is a combination of two concepts, that break down as follows:

philos: “*to love like a brother*”.

xenos: “*stranger*” or “*foreigner*”; “*alien(-ated) from a person; without the knowledge of, without a share in; unheard of*”

● So, when we think of the “*stranger*” or the “*alien*”, we think not necessarily in terms of someone who doesn’t speak our language or comes from a radically different ethnic back-story, but we think about the one we do not yet know; the one who is yet to be known. The one who feels disconnected. In need of welcome.

Romans 12:13, Paul says, “*When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to offer hospitality.*”

If we are unable to carry out such hospitality within the context of our own community (with those who share a common heart and vision for life), it will likely prove difficult or strained to attempt to extend such a posture that we, ourselves, are not experiencing.

In the absence of a formal “hospitality industry” (there was no one “Leaving the light on for you”), as people journeyed, they accepted responsibility for one another. In the OT, as well as other ancient Near-Eastern texts, there were some accepted practices which characterized “hospitality”.

- The guest was not permitted to ask for anything, but they didn’t have to. The host was thoughtful and attentive to their needs and was expected to provide the best of what was available to them, despite the personal cost. It demands an, “I’m in”, before we are fully aware of the implications of that declaration.

- The guest was not expected to answer any questions about how they arrived at such a place of need. They are simply required to offer a blessing or word of thanks.

It says something about the indiscriminate nature of grace; of love. We are confronted with our own pre-judgments and asked to set them aside in order to respond well to the other.

- The objective in the encounter was that the relationship was transformed: the stranger became the friend. Every time that we receive someone “with” God, we are participating in this process by which strangers become collaborative friends of Jesus.

I think the biggest challenge we encounter is that our “*gravitational pull*” is not only toward ourselves, but the ones with whom we feel the greatest levels of affinity and comfort. The ones most like us. The one who vote like us, enjoy the same menu, wear the same jerseys.

We are diligent upon privatizing our lives and ensuring that we remain at a “safe distance” from strangers. We have been taught, from our infancy, to “*not talk to strangers*”; not to “*take candy from strangers*”. We coach a response, should the stranger get too close... “*stranger danger*”. We are formed in “fear”. We create the illusion of safety and become immediately suspicious of anyone that we don’t know. Such an encouragement is not to cast “wisdom” to the wind, but it can prevent us from engaging the stranger, at all.

Sometimes strangers show up “unannounced” in our lives.

They show up, frail and desperate, weary from their own journey. In need of respite or reprieve. We don’t feel well-prepared.

We are called upon to simply receive them and make available to them what is available to us (time, attention, hope, a bacon-wrapped filet!) We say, “*This is our life and we are willing to invite you into it! It’s unscripted; it’s not staged*”. Our kids are always dressed like it’s picture-day at school; we always have pumpkin-spice potpourri burning and fresh banana bread coming out of the oven and smooth jazz on Pandora and I’m in my smoking jacket, poised to receive you.

Most often, the most significant need we have is not charity, but hospitality.

Hospitality to the stranger is almost easier because we expect them to remain just that: “strangers”. I can toss some money at you and wish you well, but I won’t have to think about a continued commitment to you and how I might be called upon to make space for you in my already over-crowded life.

Hospitality brings not just “resources” together, but “people” together. Charity says, *“Here’s a gift card. Go grab yourself some dinner.”* Hospitality says, *“How about I fix you dinner?”* Charity says, *“Tell me what you need?”*. Hospitality says, *“Tell me your story.”*

It seems that the stranger is actually the gift to us.

I know and embrace the grace and welcome of God as I experience you extending it toward me. Your “neediness”, in no way, undermines or challenges your unique worth and value. In fact, it will be the common experience of us all... to be in need.

Don’t over-think it.

You have to see the stranger that you keep bumping into every day. Introduce yourself. Buy them a coffee and a pumpkin scone. Invite someone into something you do all of the time.

Jesus says, *“Start in this room”*. With the family of faith. Most often in church we say, *“Why don’t you organize it for us and provide the adequate social-media platforms, vet the participants and provide us with a list of recommended probing-questions and we will sign up. If they’re weird and it doesn’t work out, I’ll take another run at it later.”*

Jesus comes to us as the ‘stranger’ in search of a host; in hopes of welcome [Revelation 3:20].

God, who had absolute privacy and security, would leave his home, to venture in his world, virtually homeless, and vulnerable. God, who has no needs (Acts 17) came as one who would allow himself to be served by us, not so that we might “know our place in the hierarchy”, but that we might more fully share his heart.

The ultimate act of hospitality was when Jesus Christ died for sinners to make everyone who believes a member of the household of God. We are no longer strangers and sojourners. We have come home to God.

Interestingly, the sacrament (sacred thing) that he gives us to most readily identify him with his nature and mission is a table and a meal. A place with him, which invites us to join him in his vulnerability and passion.