

Hospitality: The Neglected Key to Christian Community

Rich Nathan

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John: Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair

Hebrews 13:1-3

In preparation for the upcoming holidays, I thought I'd share a few ideas to assist some of you to have a merrier Christmas. Since Martha Stewart has been in the news recently, I decided to check out some of Martha's suggestions for creating unforgettable memories at Christmas. Now, some of these ideas take a little bit of time and that's why I decided to talk about them now, in order to give you enough lead time to properly prepare for the Christmas holidays.

You want to begin, of course, by making your own wrapping paper for your gifts. Martha Stewart does. As she says, "Whenever possible, we like to decorate our packages from nature. We have found that leaves dipped in metallic paint make particularly beautiful trimmings, and can also be used to make wrapping paper itself." She uses gilded twigs, pepperberries, and tiny pinecones as package trims. She also uses fresh and dried bay leaves, galax leaves and lemon leaves when making her wrapping paper.

Some of you, of course, are asking: What's wrapping paper? Doesn't everyone use discarded Kroger plastic bags to wrap their gifts?

Well, friends, not everybody does.

Of course, then, you want to get your table ready. Let me just read to you about how Martha sets her table.

A silver-leafed piece of fruit, such as a pear, and a small spray of pepperberries mark each place setting; a crystal plate from the 1840's and silver lusterware dinner plate are layered beneath them. Antique stemware adds more pale shimmering beauty to the table.

Martha, of course, presents a platter of English cheeses to her guests. And as she says, "glass cake stands stacked one upon the other form the base for a dramatic tower of more silvered fruit and pepperberries."

So, I guess paper plates are out for Christmas this year, as is eating straight out of a can.

Since food is such a central item in any Christmas dinner, have you ever thought of making these wild mushroom and leek beggar's purses tied with leek ribbon and garnished with thyme. They look like tiny gifts. Aren't they cute?

Here's a nice little dish. These dainty Seckle pears were poached in white wine and robed in caramel sauce just before serving. As Martha says, "They are delicious with gingerbread and small enough to tempt even a satiated appetite."

When you are decorating your house for the holidays, you won't want to forget to make your copper cookie tree. Martha writes:

To decorate my parlor, I make a boxwood topiary by sticking small branches of boxwood into a grapevine-covered cone of heavy wire. [You could make the same thing by using chicken or rabbit wire, she suggests. Some rabbit wire that you may just have lying around the house.] The cookies are prepared from gingerbread. Copperleaf is then applied to each cookie. [Martha loves metal leaf. Are you getting that idea?] The copper-covered cookies are then hung amidst the boxwood with little hooks and the completed tree is placed on my 18th century tilt-top table in the parlor. [If you don't have an 18th century tilt-top table, you can place your copper cookie tree on top of your TV tray, or your cement block and boards bookcase.]

Finally, I just want to show you what is the crowning and most essential feature of any Christmas celebration. Without this, Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas! Of course, I'm talking about the Gingerbread Mansion. While your gift-wrapping is drying and the mushroom and leek beggar purses are baking, in your copious free time you can make a Gingerbread Mansion. Again, I just want to quote from Martha herself. She writes:

Every year I vow never, never, never to make another gingerbread house. And each year, something makes me break that vow, resulting in the best house ever. It was the same this year. I don't know what induced me to build gingerbread houses in the first place (one suspects a demonic influence), nor what inspired me to make them so large and elaborate.

Over the years I've made country cottages, townhouses, once even a huge Viennese baroque church for the family of Ronald Lauder, our Ambassador to Austria. This year I wanted to make a house similar to my own Turkey Hill Federal Farmhouse. But its proportion and window size got a bit exaggerated. [Martha jokingly says] My real home, unlike its gingerbread replica, lacks a gold leaf roof. But that's the beauty of a gingerbread house. Frustrated architects, decorators and contractors will delight in this lovely work, as will the children of the house who take the whole thing so much in stride.

How does Martha Stewart's preparations make you feel? Have any of you said to yourself, "Now, that's a great idea?" Or, "I prefer to make my gingerbread house like my Swiss ski chalet in Aspen, Colorado."

Is it any wonder that so many women feel like such utter failures or exhaust themselves during the holidays trying to create some unreachable standard as Martha Stewart and her 700 assistants are able to pull off?

In today's message I don't want to talk about how you and I can do a better job of entertaining people in our homes. I want to talk about the neglected practice of hospitality. These days we hardly ever hear the word "hospitality" mentioned except with respect to the "hospitality industry" – the hotel, motel, and restaurant industry.

Karen Mains, in a book written nearly 30 years ago titled *Open Heart, Open Home*, makes some excellent points about the difference between entertaining and hospitality. She says entertaining is terrible bondage. Its source is human pride that demands perfection and fosters the urge to impress. It is a rigorous taskmaster, which enslaves. In contrast, biblical hospitality is a freedom, which liberates.

Entertaining says, "I want to impress you with my beautiful home, my clever decorating, my gourmet cooking." Hospitality says, "This home is not mine. It is a gift from my Master. I am his servant and I want to use it as he desires." Hospitality does not try to impress, but to serve. Entertaining always puts things before people. "So and so is coming; I've got to get this new thing before they come. My house has to be absolutely perfect." Hospitality puts people before things. Entertaining is rooted in our pride. Our homes and all that we do always have to be perfect. Hospitality is rooted in our humanity. Because we don't maintain false pretenses, people can relax in our homes.

I've been talking for the past several months about Christian community. A few weeks ago I talked with you about how utterly isolated most people are. American society right now has no place for the cultivation of friendships, or deep relationships, or ongoing connectedness between people. I believe that if you and I in this church simply were able to put into practice this one thing, hospitality, we would be a long way toward recovering community in our fragmented world. Simply this one thing, the practice of hospitality, would move us light years down the road toward creating a radically alternative society to America's individualism, isolation, and disconnectedness. I've called today's talk, "Hospitality: The Neglected Key to Christian Community." Let's pray.

So many of my favorite memories involve eating. Is that true in your life? In my early childhood, my family lived in a 3-floor house. We lived in the basement. My grandparents and aunt lived on the second floor. And then my uncle and his family lived on the third floor. My grandfather was in the meat business and had

the accounts of some of the famous New York nightclubs that were so popular back 30-40 years ago. He used to sell meat to the Copacabana and the Stork Club. He also sold to a place called The Latin Quarter. Every Thanksgiving the chef at The Latin Quarter would prepare our Thanksgiving meal. And I remember as a little boy watching my grandfather carry out from the back of his car boxes full of food – a huge 25 lb. turkey, buckets of stuffing, pies and cakes.

Some of the most distinct memories I have of my childhood involve eating. I come by that quite honestly. My father, who is 80 years old, would have a biography written of his life titled, *My Life: A History of Eating*.

Why is eating and the experience of hospitality so important to us? I think it is because we experience life, not only food, but relational connectedness around a meal. Think back to the last serious argument you had with someone. If you have eventually worked your way to reconciliation, it probably involved a meal along the way. Certainly, of course, you can simply apologize. But something seems missing until you sit down and have lunch together.

There is, in our lives, a mysterious connection between relationship and food. It is present in our memories. It is present in our rituals. Meals are central in most the world's religions. Zen Buddhism, for example, has an elaborate tea ceremony. In Islam, the practice of hospitality and elaborate meals offered for a guest are a religious duty. For most Jews, the one thing that they will still do, even if they are completely non-practicing Jews, is the Passover Seder. A Jew may never go to synagogue, may not keep a Kosher home, but he or she will almost certainly participate in a Passover Seder. A meal is at the center of the religion.

That's certainly true of Christianity. In the gospels, it appears that Jesus basically goes from one dinner party to another—from Mary and Martha's house, to the house of Peter's mother-in-law. At the center of our faith is a meal, the Last Supper, ritualized in us eating, taking communion week by week.

Our religious rituals emphasize to us that hospitality and eating are central features of life. So do some of our stories and movies. There is a very memorable movie called "Babette's Feast" based on a story by Isak Dinesen.

An exiled French woman mysteriously enters the life of a small religious community. These folks are all very sterile, icy cold Lutherans. The people in the community had a very narrow view of God's creation, believing as they say in the book, that we should cleanse our tongue of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving.

But Babette cooks for them a magnificent banquet that challenges even their extreme resolve to not ever enjoy themselves. Throughout the feast, these men

and women try valiantly to not experience any pleasure. They don't say a word to Babette about the meal. They think that by not speaking, they can deny what they feel. But they can't help themselves. They get swept away by the taste and beauty of the meal.

And you see that walls between the people start to break down little by little. Old arguments get resolved. Old hurts get healed. Forgiveness is expressed around the table. Something miraculous happens during the feast. Something the diners themselves don't understand. God is at work in the meal creating community.

And this is ultimately why the practice of hospitality and eating together is so important. Simply put, hospitality is key for us in building the kind of church that God wants to create here in Central Ohio.

Listen, we have so many kids and young adults, and even some older adults who were raised in broken families. Many of us come into the church as the walking wounded. We are relationally estranged and mistrustful, defensive, hurt, alienated, and angry. How does a person truly get healed when their foundation in their own family of origin is broken? How does a person learn to resolve their father issues and mother issues, or sibling issues? Often, it is by God using the experience of hospitality to bring healing and wholeness. By simply welcoming people into our homes, we have an opportunity to model healthy relationships; if you are married and have kids, you can model healthy family life – warts and all.

Edith Schaeffer, who co-founded the Swiss community called L'Abri with her famous husband, Francis, said in one of her books, "For some young people, our L'Abri homes were the first really happy homes they had ever experienced. You can't imagine what the opportunity of eating, doing dishes, helping peel potatoes, being part of a conversation, and family prayer in the variety of homes that any amount of lecturing or talking about home life, or counseling could never do."

You want to see young people and older people made whole and well? Let's practice hospitality with them.

How can we have a racially diverse church? How can we? Overcome all of the suspicions, resentments, prejudices, and years of miscommunication and misunderstanding that exists between the races in America? Corporations have hired diversity consultants, a good thing. They have training programs. But I tell you, simply practicing hospitality to someone of a different race, simply inviting into your home and sharing a meal and conversation with someone who looks different than you is way better than diversity programming or political solutions.

How can we assist people to grow up as Christians, to become real disciples, who consistently choose for God and not for themselves? How can we get people to make necessary sacrifices for the Kingdom of God? To be other centered? To be grateful, to bear some of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives –

love, joy and peace? How do you get people to grow? Again, I believe there is no better context other than hospitality.

We cannot grow on our own. We need each other. And we need each other not in the context of a sterile meeting. We need each other in a highly relational, accepting, and gracious environment of home, food, and welcome. Only through the practice of hospitality can we have the kind of church that God desires to build here in Central Ohio.

You know, hospitality is an indispensable part of Christian spirituality. If you want to be considered a spiritual person, a God-centered person, from a biblical perspective, practice hospitality. Hospitality was the practice of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Turn with me to Genesis 18.

SLIDE:

Genesis 18:1-8 The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham 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, my lord, 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—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread."

Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

We find in this text that Abraham is hot and tired. It says, *The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.*

The guests who come are inconvenient guests. They are coming at a time when Abraham would normally be taking a siesta. He doesn't know who the guests are. But instead of sitting on his pillow, Abraham practices Middle Eastern hospitality. This is a great text on how hospitality ought to be practiced. Abraham doesn't just sit on his couch and yell, "The door is open, come on it." He runs to his guests and greets them. A warm welcome is the beginning point of practicing hospitality. And he communicates to his guests that they are honoring him by letting him serve them. He doesn't see his guests as an

inconvenience or burden. They brought honor to him. He says in verse 3, *If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought that you may all wash your feet and rest. Let me give you something to eat so that you can be refreshed.*

This idea of being honored by being the host is still part of Arab and Muslim cultures to this day. Bill Christensen, our associate pastor, who was a missionary in Morocco for many years, said he has a friend named Mazhar (pronounced Muzhar). Mazhar felt personally responsible to offer hospitality to every guest in the village where they lived. Mazhar would often get into arguments with Bill about who would host a mutual friend of theirs who was coming into town. For Mazhar being the host was a question of honor. For the people of the Bible, and the people in the Muslim world today, who share biblical values, it is truly more blessed to give than to receive. You bless yourself by practicing hospitality.

But what Abraham doesn't know is who it is that he's welcoming. He's welcoming the Lord and two angels. So we read in verse 9,

SLIDE:

"Where is your wife, Sarah," they asked him.

"There in the tent," he said.

Then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son."

Here is the idea. Are you a person interested in experiencing more of God in your life? Do you regularly say to yourself, "I want a deeper relationship with God. I want more contact with God. I want more of God's kingdom in my life. I want a closer relationship with God." How can you find more of God and more of God's blessing in your life? Certainly, part of the equation involves the practice of a devotional life, spending time along with God in secret each day, reading God's Word, talking to God, being quiet enough to listen. Certainly, a part of the equation is making space for a fresh experience of God. That's why we have a conference like the one we're having on Experiencing the Holy Spirit this week.

But I believe if you are a person who wants to encounter God more often, engage in the neglected practice of hospitality. Hebrews 13:2 reads this way:

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

Not only did Abraham have an encounter with God through the practice of hospitality, but so did his nephew Lot in Gen. 19; and so did Rahab, the prostitute; and so did Gideon's parents; and so did widows who served the

prophets Elijah and Elisha. We open up our lives to God, by opening up our lives to each other.

Not only was hospitality the practice of the patriarchs and the great people of the Old Testament, but hospitality was the practice of Jesus. We find Jesus in the gospels constantly experiencing hospitality – the hospitality of Mary and Martha, Simon the Pharisee, and so on, but we also see Jesus practicing hospitality. In fact, he served as the host of the world's largest dinner party on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee. Jesus feeds 5000 men along with their spouses and children. He is the host of this enormous meal.

Hospitality for Jesus was a critical sign of the breaking in of the kingdom of God. Hospitality was, for him, the way he announced that God was doing something new in the world through his life and through his death.

I want you to see this. Turn with me to Mark 2:13-17.

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Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Now let me give you the setting for the story and why Jesus' practice was so radical. We read in verse 16, *When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

About two centuries before this event, a little group of brave Jews, led by Judah Maccabee, revolted against the Greek occupiers of the Promised Land and kicked them out. For the first time in centuries, the Jews for a short period of time, controlled the Promised Land. During this time, a religious movement arose among the Jews called "Phariseism." The word "Pharisee" literally means the "separate ones." Pharisees were those Jews who were exhorting their fellow countrymen to separate themselves from the pagans and from pagan ways, and to live entirely for God.

Now, in order to accomplish that, Pharisees taught that the laws that were binding on the priests in the temple, ought to be practiced by every Jew throughout the nation. There were certain laws of ritual purity that God laid down for the priests in books like Leviticus. The book said that every one of us ought to strive to obey all of these laws of ritual purity.

And so the center of Jewish life moved from the temple to the home and from the temple altar to the kitchen table. To the Pharisees there was nothing more important, in terms of one's holiness before God, than focusing on the purity of your every day food and the purity of your companions. The religion of the Pharisees was one of exclusion, separation, going through life insulated from contact with people and things they considered unclean.

God, in Jesus Christ, did a new thing in Judaism. Instead of closing the door in people's faces, Jesus threw the door wide open to sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and anyone who would come. The ministry of Jesus can be summed up in one word: welcome. In contrast the narrow, barrier-building activity of the Pharisees, Jesus looked at every human being and said to them, "You are welcome."

Now you say, "Isn't that wonderful? Jesus is demonstrating the infinitely large and welcoming heart of God to anyone who will come to God – whatever your background, however you've blown it in life. God says that if you will come to him without conditions, without reserve, if you will turn your life over to him, God says, "Come to my banqueting table. Come and eat."

You say, "Well, that is such great news. Who could be offended by someone so welcoming as Jesus?"

The Pharisees were offended. Again, in verse 16,

SLIDE:

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Likewise, in Luke 15:1-2,

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Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Who could be offended by the welcoming heart of Jesus? The Pharisees, you, me, and anyone else whose heart is narrower than Jesus' heart. It is easy to understand the offense of Jesus' welcome when you consider who he was eating with. He was eating with tax collectors. The tax collector wasn't just the

equivalent of a drug addict, prostitute, or alcoholic. The tax collector was someone who was in collaboration with the oppressive Roman government of Jesus' day. The tax collector was someone who gouged fellow Jews, who brought injury and hurt to other people. And when you go ahead and eat with someone who has hurt another person, you cause offense.

Let me bring this down for you. If there has been a divorce in your family, pressure will be brought to bear for you to side with one of the parties against the other, particularly if the other party was the offender. You can find yourself in a position very much like Jesus and the question will be asked of you, "how can you continue to have a relationship with your dad when your dad is an adulterer?" "Why in the world would you have my ex over to your house? You are my sister, my brother. How can you continue to have a relationship with her or him?" "Why would you invite that person to your wedding? She broke up my marriage." "After all that the boss has done, you are still friendly with him?"

How many of you have faced pressure to narrow the scope of your welcome? How many of you have pressured others to narrow the scope of their welcome and relationship?

Of course, this doesn't mean that for someone who is dangerous, a molester, physically abusive, or involved in criminal activity that you throw the doors of your house open and let your kids stay with them. But I guarantee you that if you try to put into practice the big heart of Jesus, who welcomes others, you will offend those who don't believe a certain group or person ought to be welcomed.

When I was in college Marlene and I held a weekly Bible study in our home every Saturday afternoon. We had about 25 kids in our house. And after our study, we often did a meal together. We lived in a little Italian neighborhood in Cleveland. One of the kids who came to our home was a black student from our college at Case Western Reserve. A number of our neighbors didn't like the fact that a black friend was coming to our house all the time and having dinner with us. And so one day we had a note pinned to our door, anonymous, of course, threatening that they would put a bomb in our home and blow up our house if we kept having our friend over. That was in 1977. Marlene and I tore up the note and said that God would just have to protect us because we were still going to have our friend over.

Jesus' practice of radical hospitality became a leadership requirement in the early church. In 1 Timothy 3:2, we read this:

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Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach...

Likewise in Titus 1:8 regarding an elder, we read:

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Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright and disciplined.

Hospitality is not just a requirement of eldership, but the practice of hospitality became a New Testament obligation of every Christian. In Romans 12:13, the apostle Paul is going through a list of injunctions concerning the way we ought to do Christian community with each other. He says this:

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Share with God's people who are in need, practice hospitality.

Likewise we read in 1 Peter 4:9,

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Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

And in Hebrews 13, the verse we looked at just a little while ago, we read:

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Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

The Greek word for hospitality, "philoxenia" is a Greek compound word. Philo means love, like Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love." Philoxenia means the love of xenos – stranger; the love of a stranger. Hospitality literally is the love of a stranger.

It is here that Jesus' model formed the thinking of the early church. For Jesus, the distinctive of hospitality was that you not only opened up your home and your life to friends, those you already know, those you already have relationship with, but you open up your home and life to the stranger, to people you don't know. You live in an ever increasingly large circle.

Hospitality was the criterion for choosing elders. It was a commandment given to all Christians. And hospitality is the standard by which you and I will be judged eternally. Look at Matthew 25 with me. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus tell us that in the end he will come and separate his people, who he calls the sheep, from the goats, those who are living in rebellion to him. And what will be the criteria by which these sheep and goats will be separated? The criteria will be our practice of hospitality. Look at verse 37:

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Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see

you sick or in prison and go on to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of these brothers of mine you did for me."

We will be judged by our practice of hospitality toward our fellow Christians. Not just our practice with our friends, but for those who cannot repay us. And who will be separated eternally from God? Those who have no room for the people of God. We read in verse 44 regarding those who are eternally separated from God, they will answer:

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"Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger needing clothes, or sick and in prison and did not help you." He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Your practice of hospitality and my practice of hospitality is the defining mark of whether we really have the life of Jesus Christ in us. If Jesus is living in your heart, he will cause you to be a welcomer of others. The fruit of whether you have the real Jesus inside that you are a possessor of Christ and not just a professor of Christianity, is seen in how open and welcoming you really are.

Why then do we object to practicing hospitality? Some of us would say, "Why do I have to reach out to a stranger? My life is very full of relationships. Why do I have to open my home and my life to a new person?"

Well, a simple response might be because Jesus commands you to in Luke 14. Jesus says:

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When you give a luncheon or dinner do not invite your friends [literally, do not only invite your friends], brothers, or rich neighbors. If you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

What is distinctive about Christian hospitality is that you offer it to people who cannot and often will not repay you. That person may be poor, or an international student, or socially awkward. The stranger that we are to welcome is the person without something. It may be that they are without relationship and what you are offering is human connectedness. Folks without means, who aren't in the inner circle of the church, who don't live in a great suburban house, whose lives are hard, people without means ought to touch the hearts of Christians.

There is a wonderful story told of Fiorella LaGuardia, the very popular mayor of NYC during the depression. LaGuardia was serving on the bench of a night court in NYC in 1935 when a woman was brought before the court for stealing a

loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her and that her daughter was sick. Her new grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen refused to drop the charges.

"It's a bad neighborhood, Your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach these people a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He said, "I have to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. \$10 or 10 days in jail." But even as he said it, he reached into his pocket and took out a \$10 bill. He said, "Here's the \$10 fine, which I now remit. And furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a city where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day the NYC newspapers reported \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady, who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, 50 cents of which was collected from the grocer who charged her with stealing. The people who were in the court and were charged with various traffic violations paid 50 cents a piece to that old woman gave the mayor a standing ovation.

The first step in practicing hospitality and making room for someone in our home is making room for a new person in our hearts. I believe that we often simply have to pray, "God, stretch my heart. For some reason or other my heart has shrunk up. Lord, stretch my heart so that it can be touched again."

Why do we object to practicing hospitality? Because we feel like we don't have enough. We don't have enough time. We don't have enough money. We don't have enough space. We're pulled in a million directions.

When you feel like you don't have enough, when you feel like saying, "I can't open my life up to another person; I have nothing left to give," that is a great indicator that you yourself need to be nourished by God. Something has happened to remove you as a branch from the living vine. You've stopped abiding in Christ for some reason. Perhaps there is unforgiveness in your life that is closing you off to God. Perhaps you aren't making room in your life for God. When you feel like you don't have enough, often it is a sign that your own soul is not being nourished by God.

It is, of course, okay to admit that you have limits. As Edith Schaeffer once said, "It is not a sin to confess that we have limits." But even though you cannot do everything, you can do something. You can start somewhere in opening up your home to another. And do you know that God in the Bible promises to supply us. When we share whatever little we have, a little bit of space, a little bit of time, a little bit of food, a little bit of money – when we share the little bit we have with another, God promises to multiply it. 2 Cor. 9:8,

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And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that in all things, and at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

And in verse 10 we read:

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Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

"My house isn't fixed up," you say.

"I live in a small apartment."

"I don't have great furniture."

"I'm just a student and live on a fixed income."

I believe that a major issue in our limiting hospitality to others is simply pride. We don't want others to see us unless everything in our lives and everything in our home is perfect. The practice of hospitality is not only saying to people, "Come as you are, you'll be loved," the practice of hospitality is saying, "Come into my home and my life as I am. Not only come as you are, but come to me as I am – warts and all."

Even when you aren't wearing makeup, even when your house is in less than perfect shape, and even when you have kids or toys lying around. What we have to offer is relationship and connection.

Sometimes we have the opposite problem, however. It is "my house is really fixed up and I don't want a bunch of strangers trampling all over my stuff." Hospitality, friends, really is the test of our hearts. That's why we are going to be judged based on our practice of hospitality. Because it is such a great indicator of the state of our hearts.

I say this with all affection, but do you really want to continue to be the kind of person that places your things, which will go out of style or end up on some junk heap somewhere, do you really want to be the kind of person who places your things above people who are made in the image of God and for whom Christ died? Those who, to use C.S. Lewis' words, if we saw them in their eternal heavenly glorified states, we would be tempted to fall down and worship.

See, the key things for us as Americans in being able to practice hospitality without a grudging spirit is to value people above our things. If you are going to open up your home, some of your things are going to be ruined, and that's okay. A ring on your expensive coffee table that was left because someone accidentally put his or her cup there is okay. God sees it and will reward you for your hospitality. A stain on your sofa, a stain on your rug, or a place where

someone spilled a drink is okay. God sees it and will reward you for valuing people above your things.

You know, whatever excuse you raise for not practicing hospitality – you are a single man, you can't cook, you don't have time, it's not your gift – ask yourself this question, friend: how big do I want my heart to be? Not only do I want the church that God desires to build in Central Ohio built, but I also want to become the kind of person that God desires to make. How big do you want your heart to be? As you get older, don't you want to get better? Don't you want to become a bigger person, a more generous person, a more grateful person, a more embracing person, and a more welcoming person? Don't you want the lines in your face to be smile lines, to be joy lines and not lines of grimness, selfishness or bitterness?

So, how do we practice hospitality? As a church we continually challenge ourselves to the practice of welcome. We keep pushing the boundaries as Jesus would lead us and have us push it. That's why our church has an ESL program. We have four levels of classes for Spanish speakers, and speakers of other languages. We have a need for more tutors. You can contact Dixie at our church about that. To assist people to be welcomed into the American community here in town.

We currently have Portuguese translations of my messages. The first of the year we also want to offer Spanish language translation. You can contact Ponce Yanez at the church, if you are interested in helping out with that.

Our church welcomes people with disabilities. We have two services that interpret for the hearing impaired. We have large print song sheets and bulletins for the visually impaired. We have special needs kids in children's ministry who have a buddy who accompanies them to their classes. We have a TenderCare class for the severely mentally disabled. We have a Body Builders class for teens who are mentally disabled.

Part of our practice of hospitality is welcoming kids from the neighborhood. We have an afterschool program here for children in our neighborhood, many of whom come from single parents' families. We need tutors to help them. If you are interested in doing that, you can contact Kevin Brown.

But hospitality is not just something done on a grand scale. Hospitality is a learned skill that is put into practice in every one of our lives. Every single person, every student, every married person, every man and woman can learn the skill of hospitality. We can put into practice in our own lives having people into our homes at least weekly. Inviting folks into our homes who are not just our close friends and family, but newcomers and strangers.

One way to practice hospitality is to open up your home and host a small group.

We have discovered that just as important as the small group leader here at the church is the host home. For those of you who have children, let me let you in on a little secret. The easiest way to care for your kids and still have you participate in a small group is to have you host the group at your home. Marlene and I did that for about a decade while our kids were growing up. When they were little, we were able to put them to bed and still have our group. When they got older they played with other kids in our basement. If you say, "I can't find a babysitter," then host the group in your home.

Here is what I would like you to do. I'd like you to open up your bulletins. There are two specific ways that I'd like to call upon you to put this talk into practice. Take out your bulletin. There is a flap on the right side of the bulletin that you can fill out that says you would be willing to host a small group, a woman's group, men's group, or a Joshua House (young adult) group. If you are willing to do that, fill that out. Someone will be getting in touch with you. We have an application process, but someone will get in touch with you. This is something Marlene and I do with our crazy schedules and our full life. We welcome people into our home each week. This is something I would encourage you to do.

Secondly, Thanksgiving is coming up.

For years our church has been supporting a ministry to International students called International Friendships (IFI).

Every year IFI sponsors a Thanksgiving dinner to International Students by pairing up 1 - 2 International students to a Christian American families who open up their homes to share their Thanksgiving celebrations with International students who may not have had a chance to visit an American home, have a significant interactions with Christians, or ever taste turkey!

If you would like to host a couple of international students (you decide on the number) for Thanksgiving this year, this is what we would like you to do:

1. Sign your name on the tear off part of today's bulletin and check the box that reflects your desire to host an international student for Thanksgiving dinner .
2. Out in the Lobby at the small group table, ask for a registration form to host an international student for Thanksgiving dinner

Conclusion.

Hospitality: The Neglected Key to Christian Community

Rich Nathan

November 8-9, 2003

John: Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair

Hebrews 13:1-3

I. How Did Hospitality Get a Bad Reputation?

II. Why is Hospitality So Important?

- A. Our Memories
- B. Our Rituals
- C. Our Stories
- D. Our Church
- E. Our Lives

III. How is Hospitality Practiced in the Bible?

- A. The Practice of the Patriarchs
- B. The Practice of Jesus
- C. The Practice of the Early Church

IV. Why Do We Object to Hospitality?

V. How Can We Practice Hospitality?

- A. As a Church
- B. As Individuals