

Hospitality: Making Room for Love

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Matthew 25:31-46

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

God has made room for us in His family, and He calls us to make room for others as we welcome them into the family of God and nurture them in our love for God, as we promise to do.

Children's Message: When I was young, I had the opportunity to see a movie on baptism produced by the Catholic Church, and I have since had the opportunity to see it several times. It is a true story about a young boy in Mexico named Alfredo, who lost his entire family in a terrible fire, and he was severely burned. For a long time, he was not only an orphan but homeless. He wandered the streets and countryside looking for a place to belong. He came upon an orphanage. He would look in the gates and see the boys playing and laughing and he longed to be a part of their community. One day the priest was walking by, and Alfredo ran up to him, fell at his feet and begged him to allow him to be part of that community. Of course, when the Father heard his story, he wanted to welcome Alfredo, but because of the scars and the severe disfigurement of his face and body, he wondered if the boys would accept him. So he told Alfredo that he would talk to the boys.

The film shows over a hundred boys lined up in the courtyard of this large orphanage as the Father explains the story of Alfredo and his desire to be

part of their community, to have a home with them. He asks them if they will welcome Alfredo, and they all nod their heads and say, "Yes, yes we will accept him. Let him come." But the Father is careful and emphasizes that he is very broken and very disfigured. Again, they assure the Father they will welcome him. So the Father leads Alfredo into the courtyard, and there is dead silence as the boys see him for the first time, with all of his scars and brokenness. And then, one very small boy steps out of the line and walks to Alfredo, takes his hand and says, "Tu es mi hermano." "You are my brother." And then, he leads Alfredo into the community to stand in line beside him. The film cuts to an evening shot of the courtyard of the orphanage, where a celebration is taking place with music, dancing, piñatas and fireworks. One cannot help but think of Jesus' parable about the lost son whose father threw a party to welcome him home.

The story of Alfredo teaches us about baptism and what it means to belong to God and to His family of faith. God has made room for us in His

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Our topic for today is hospitality. What comes to mind when you think of the word hospitality? In her book, *Making Room*, Christine Pohl writes, “Today when we think of hospitality. . . we picture having family and friends over for a pleasant meal. Or we may think of the ‘hospitality industry’ of hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards. Today, most understandings of hospitality have a minimal moral component—hospitality is a nice extra if we have the time or the resources, but we rarely view it as a spiritual obligation or as a dynamic expression of vibrant Christianity.”

We know that in the Great Command Jesus made clear that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. But what exactly does that look like? Today’s passage fills in the details about who is a neighbor and how we love him/her. This passage is a picture of hospitality as we make room for loving the least of these.

This passage is actually a parable Jesus tells to help us understand the judgment. He wants to make clear that discipleship is not just a theological ideal that we accept. Disciple-

ship is living our lives as Jesus would live if he were us. Jesus extended hospitality by loving and caring for those on the margins of his own society. And, as his disciples, we are to do the same.

As I said earlier, most of us probably equate hospitality with entertaining, but the ancient and biblical understanding of hospitality was welcoming strangers into a home and offering them food, shelter and protection. The ancient codes of hospitality were strict and necessary because travel was dangerous. There were no hotels or restaurants, so people who traveled were completely dependent on the kindness and generosity of others to care for them. This was especially true when they had to travel through enemy territory. Strangers and travelers were considered among the most vulnerable in society, and so hospitality was an essential practice to care for them.

Each of the acts described in our passage for today represents a way of extending hospitality to the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters as we care for the most needy, the most vulnerable, and each act provides clinching evidence of kingdom life. I shared the story of Alfredo because it is a living picture of the meaning of baptism as well as the practice of hospitality. This is what we are called to do as the family of God: we are to love and serve others by welcoming and caring

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for them—especially the most vulnerable and most needy.

What is hospitality? I want to redefine hospitality. I want to get out of your mind the narrow definition of hospitality as entertaining and replace it with this big, grand idea: hospitality is making room for love.

Marjorie Thompsons expands on this in her book, *Soul Feast*, saying: “Hospitality is essentially an expression of love. It is a movement to include the guest in the very best of what we ourselves have received and can therefore offer. It is the act of sharing *who we are* as well as *what we have*. Thus, hospitality of the heart lies beneath every hospitable act. The classic elements of hospitality offered to guests are food and drink, shelter and rest, protection and care, enjoyment and peace. These paired categories cover a basic range of physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. They reveal that hospitality is concerned with the total well-being of the guest.”

This rich, textured explanation helps us to recognize that *hospitality always begins with God*. Whatever forms our hospitality may take, it is first a response to God's hospitality to us.

This hospitality of God's is evident in the creation itself. In the beginning, God made room for us in the garden—a beautiful home filled with delight and every conceivable need met, including food, shelter, beauty

and peace. All of this was given by God's grace for nourishment, care and enjoyment. Our part was to receive this gift of hospitality with gratitude and blessing. But, instead, we took the role of host away from God and tried to provide and care for ourselves. It was a tragic breach of relationship and a rejection of God's love.

But God's love did not leave us as aliens and strangers. The second great act of divine hospitality is the Incarnation: “The Word became flesh and *dwelt among us*.” In Christ, God crashed into this dark and sinful world—enemy territory, if you will. He, Himself, was the stranger, the unrecognized, unloved one who came and made His home with us in the incarnation so that we could have a home with Him through reconciliation.

The cross reveals the lengths to which God will go to reach us, to heal us, to redeem us. The cross is the supreme example of hospitality as Christ stretched out his arms to release us from our sin, receive us in love and invite us to a new life. We were once enemies of God, but in Christ we are welcomed and embraced as the children of God.

Our sacraments are evidence of God's hospitality to us. In Baptism, we are welcomed into the household of God, the family of faith. In the Lord's Supper, we celebrate at the family meal the truth that God has not only provided for us but

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continues to love us, care for us and nourish us by His grace.

This is the good news. God has extended His hospitality to us through Jesus Christ. But, sadly, many of us are like those in the parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14, who make myriad excuses for not responding to God's gift of hospitality. We claim that we are too busy. We have more important or urgent things to do. Samuel Johnson said, "In a commercial country, a busy country, time becomes precious, and...hospitality is not so much valued."

God wants us to value hospitality. But before we can make room for love in extending hospitality, we first have to make room in our lives to receive it. Let's explore first *how we receive hospitality and the grace that accompanies it?*

We receive hospitality when we make room for the sinful and broken parts of ourselves. I love the grace-filled, redemptive story of Alfredo, because it is a living witness of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every time I see that film or think of his life, I am reminded that all of us are strangers and aliens. All of us are broken, wounded and scarred, though for many that is not outwardly apparent. Most of us develop ways of relating and living in the world that minimize the pain of our wounds and keep us from being rejected by others. But understand, our adaptive patterns often keep us from the healing,

transformation and experience of community that we long for, that we were created and redeemed for.

We have to make room to face the hard realities of our lives—to acknowledge the sin that has estranged us from God and others, the people and circumstances that have disappointed or even wounded, the circumstances that have not turned out as we had expected or hoped they would. Unless we make room in our lives to acknowledge *all* that are—the good, the bad and the ugly—we will never be able to make room in our lives for God or others. We must be hospitable to ourselves before we can be hospitable to others.

We receive hospitality when we make room in our lives for God. Alfredo threw himself at the priest's feet, which was a picture of coming to God with all of our need and desperation. As we bring our brokenness and sinfulness into the light of Christ's presence, we experience his hospitality. We receive his amazing grace and unconditional love. And in the safety of his presence, we experience healing and transformation.

But please understand that receiving God's grace and hospitality is not a one-time event that leads to a free pass to heaven. God's hospitality is extended moment by moment, and we need to receive it continually as we make room for Him through worship, prayer, reading Scripture and

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the variety of other disciplines we are exploring this summer.

And, finally, we make room in our lives to be welcomed by others. Alfredo took a huge risk in revealing his desire to be a part of the orphanage community, not knowing if he would be rejected or accepted. It's risky business to be the new person in a new community, wanting to belong and waiting to be welcomed. This is true whether we are a student leaving in a few weeks for college, a new-comer to a community, or a long-time worshipper at this church, who is still waiting for that sense of belonging in this very large church. Like Alfredo, risk letting someone know your need and ask for help in meeting it. Step out and trust that God will lead you to that community who will welcome and love you in the name of Christ. It may take awhile, but don't give up.

I have spent a lot of time defining what hospitality is and how we receive it, because it would do no good to talk about how to practice it unless we are experiencing it ourselves. In his book, *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still—it is our vocation: to

convert the hostility into hospitality, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced."

How do we do that? How do we make room for brotherhood and sisterhood to be formed and fully experienced? There are countless ways that we can practice hospitality, and I confess that I fall short in many of the areas I am about to share.

We begin as we practice hospitality at *home* as we recognizing that our children are important guests, who are in our homes only for a while. We make room for them by being present and available to listen, affirm, guide and correct. Practicing hospitality in home life requires self-sacrifice to make room to share meals, play games and to pursue the interests of others in the family that may be different from our own.

We practice hospitality in the *workplace* by simply listening openly to the ideas and concerns of others. It's keeping our doors open and not viewing others as an interruption to our tasks but making room to love and serve those with whom we work.

We practice hospitality in our *neighborhoods* by making an effort to become acquainted with our neighbors. If we are too busy to know, love and care for those who live near us, then we are too busy.

And we practice hospitality in our church. I have been

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been blessed by recognizing the many, many ways this church does extend hospitality in many and varied ways here at VPC.

- We make room for our children, youth, and adults at various stages of life and faith by providing a variety of small and mid-sized groups to help them grow in Christ.
- We make room for people with intellectual disabilities through our Friendship class.
- We make room for strangers and people from other countries by teaching English through our ESOL program.
- We make room for people of different ages, different spiritual backgrounds, and various musical tastes through our worship services that incorporate both ancient and modern elements.
- We make room for those going through particularly difficult experiences by providing companions for the journey through our care ministries like GriefShare, Passages and Stephen Ministry.

I could go on and on. And I know there are ways that God is still calling us to do more in reflecting the hospitality that is captured in Matthew 25. Ultimately, God calls us to extend hospitality to a *world* that is alienated from Him. We can become overwhelmed listening

to the needs of the world. We cannot change the world, but each of us can do something, and all of us doing something adds up to changing our world.

I want to close today with three invitations:

First, how is God inviting you to receive His hospitality? There may be some here who have never experienced the joy of belonging to God and His family. You are here this morning physically, but spiritually you are still on the outside waiting to come in. Jesus invites all who will to come. There is nothing more important for you today than to trust Christ, establish a relationship with God, and begin the journey of faith. David and others are eager to talk more with you about how you can receive the hospitality of God through a relationship with Christ.

Second, how might you receive God's hospitality through the ministries of this church? There may be some here who have entered into the foyer of this home we call VPC. That is, you come to worship or attend other events. You may have even become a member, but you really haven't come into the living room, if you will, where you can get acquainted, get connected and build relationships with others. We want you to find that small group community or relationship where you can know and be known, love and be loved, serve and be served, celebrate

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and be celebrated. Page 7 of our bulletin lists the many ways we are seeking to make room for people through growth and care opportunities to help you connect to God and others, wherever you may be in your faith journey.

Finally, how is God calling you to extend hospitality? How is God calling you to make room in your lives for others? We have explored only a few of many ways, but right here, right now, we need people who are not just friendly but who are really willing to make room in their lives for others. If you are in a small group, will you open it to others or send one of your members to start a new group to make room for others? On page 6 of the bulletin under service opportunities, some specific needs are listed. Is God calling you to make room in your life to teach Sunday School, mentor a youth, or serve as a small-group leader? These are only a few of the many ways we need to make room for love in the life of our church.

Every one of you is invited to make room in your life on Sunday, September 5, to Labor for Your Neighbor. This really is an invitation from God to arrange our lives to love and serve people in some creative way.

You get to decide who the people are you feel called to serve. Some of you may want to arrange to spend time with

extended family or work colleagues, or neighbors that you have neglected. Some of you may want to plan a block party for your neighborhood. Or you might want to identify an elderly or sick neighbor whom you could visit or help with some act of service. You may apply the passage today by visiting a prison or feeding the hungry or clothing the naked by volunteering at a shelter.

The Labor for Your Neighbor event is an opportunity for us to practice hospitality as we creatively make room in our lives to love and serve our neighbors, whoever they may be. My heart leaps as I think of what God might do through us that day and in the coming year as we make room for love.

How is God calling you to make room in your lives for others?