

BaptistWay Bible Series for July 11: Welcoming (even) the stranger

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I have a friend who is a recent college graduate with a degree in “hospitality.” To the world, that means she has learned how to run a hotel or a restaurant. It can be tempting for us Christians to think of hospitality in those same terms—as limited to things like having a friend over to lunch.

While opening our homes and our churches to others is without doubt a part of it, Christian hospitality is so much more than that—it is opening our hearts. Our word “hospitality” comes from the Latin word that derives from *hospes*—“guest.” The New Testament Greek word for it—*philoxenia*—literally means “love of strangers.” It is extending welcome to one—anyone—who does not have what we have and inviting him or her to join us and share in what we have. The next step, then, is to invite the one who is now sharing what we have to join in what we are doing.

Dieter Zander shows great insight when it comes to hospitality. “When we moved to San Francisco, we lived on a street where our neighbors included an atheist Jewish family, a Buddhist family, an Irish Catholic family, a gay family and a Hindu family. There was no sense of community, so we decided to become conduits of the kingdom by practicing the discipline of hospitality. We learned people’s names and used them. We introduced neighbors to each other. And something began to happen. My atheist Jewish neighbor came into my kitchen once and said, ‘You know, something has happened since you all moved to this neighborhood. It’s hard to describe, but it’s like an enzyme has been added. Where once there was no life, now there’s life. What is that?’ And I said, ‘That’s the gospel of Jesus

being lived out in our lives.”

The ancient command (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

Loving the stranger—extending welcoming hospitality—was a central tenet of the Israelite law handed down from Moses. The Hebrew children knew what it was to be strangers from their time in Egypt, and God commanded them to find others similarly situated and to extend the welcome to them they would have craved themselves.

This command is interesting in light of other parts of the holiness code addressed to issues like intermarriage, and it becomes clear that to interpret the kosher and marriage laws in a way that allows the people of God to become unkind or exclusive is a misunderstanding.

The sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:34-40)

Jesus is not subtle about what he expects of his disciples. We are to give the cup of cold water, welcome in the stranger and visit those in prison. If we are not living a life in which such hospitable actions are commonplace, he will say he does not know us, for not everyone who cries “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21-23).

Of course, it is God’s grace through our faith (and not our works) that has saved us, but the purpose of that salvation is so that we can carry out the good works for which we were created (Ephesians 2:8-10).

In getting caught up in a “works vs. faith” debate to demonstrate the seeds of salvation, we often can fall guilty to the temptation to disregard good works altogether. Those works do not save us *per se*, but Jesus (and the Apostle Paul and James and Peter) leave no doubt that actions like welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked are the *sine qua non* of our faith—in other words, true faith cannot exist without these actions. If we

love Christ, we love others. If we “do it not to the least of these,” we “do it not” to Christ. And he does not know us.

Heavenly priorities (Luke 14:12-14)

Our values often are not those of the Father. Throwing the crumbs to those who have less than we do is not what Jesus wants. He tells us to reserve the place of honor for those who would not deserve it. Indeed, the gist of the command is to reserve the entire guest list for those strangers—the poor, the lame, the unwanted, the dirty. For indeed, Christ came to us while we were yet his enemies—strangers to him and to his lifestyle—and showed us the highest degree of love (2 Corinthians 5:17).

How does your church do on this count? Who sits in the good seats? Who is welcomed? Of course, you allow anybody into your services, but who is welcomed as a special guest? Does the smelly person get the same embrace? Does the homeless person get the same “right hand of fellowship?”

How do you personally do on this count?

Angels unaware (Hebrews 13:1-2)

The King James language for these verses sticks in our memories: “Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Abraham recognized three strangers as “the Lord” (Genesis 18:1-10). Jesus himself walked on the road to Emmaus without being recognized (Luke 24:13-33).

Does God come to us in disguise or send his angels to us in costume to see how we treat them? God typically is not in the business of playing tricks on us. Still, God visits us often. How sad it would be not to see him, whether he comes to us as three men or sends his angels to our humble shops and

homes, or whether he stands beside our road in the form of “the least of these.”

A young woman, meeting her future in-laws for the first time, felt their love and embrace. She never had met them before; their love was extended to her not because they knew her well but simply because she was special to their son.

The church is the body of Christ. The way Christ most often works in the world is through the church—he hugs with our arms, speaks with our voices, feeds with our hands. There is nothing wrong with running a hotel and inviting someone in for a meal, but we Christians cannot stop there. We open our hearts and extend hospitality, just as God open his heart to all of us.

We welcome in the stranger simply because every stranger is special to God’s son.