

Life Together: Are we Loving Beyond our Circles

We've been focused over these last three weeks on Life Together- what makes church community distinct and powerful- and what we've learned from Hebrews is at the center of that distinctiveness is Jesus Christ, who takes people like us who were estranged from God and each other, and makes us into family, sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. No experience of community, no matter how real and meaningful it is can come close to touching that transformative reality. Not your cross-fit workout buddies, not your sorority sisters, not your sports club. And as important as church community is to lean into and pursue with intentionality and authenticity and support and encouragement, it's not intended to be an exclusive community. The church is never intended to be a holy huddle, but a city on the hill that invites the lost into it. For this last message in our life together series we are going to ask the question from Hebrews 13, "Are we loving beyond our circles?"

How many of you remember the experience of being the new kid at school and having to walk into the cafeteria and figure out where to sit? Some of us just got triggered.... Do you know that can be the same feeling that some have walking into church? Sometimes we can find ourselves getting comfortable in our little group of people and then say, I've got my friends, I'm good now. I have my pew, my seat, my class, my small group... and I'm good. And when an inward, exclusive focus becomes the attitude and culture of a church, it will ultimately be the downfall of that church. It's just a matter of time until that church becomes a country club for Christians and in 10 years people will say, "why haven't we had any baptisms?" and in 20 years that church will just be place people marry and bury. Because healthy Christian community always has an attractational pull. It's always pulling strangers in toward family. It's continually opening and widening the circle. Today we are going to see from Hebrews 13 the command to love beyond our circles, the significance of loving beyond our circles and the practice of loving beyond our circles. And listen, I increasingly am convinced that this practice we will learn today holds a key to effectively becoming an outwardly focused church that cares about the spiritually lost, lonely and left out, a church that is effective at introducing people to Jesus.

Hebrews 13 *Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*

³ *Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

The Command to love beyond our circles

Verse one in the Greek is "Philadelphia Meneto" "Let brotherly love continue." This is often my prayer, "Lord, let Philadelphia Eagles continue to win." Danger of taking things out of context... but loving brothers and sisters in the church, this we expect. Not that it is always easy, but we get that. But then the writer goes where we may not expect. ² *Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers.* What is translated "show hospitality to strangers" is one Greek word. He says not

only “Philadelphia” but “Philoxenia”. Love of the stranger, a broad term that encompassed immigrants, exiles, travelers, religious outsiders, outcasts...

This word “philoxenia” came to be synonymous with a specific practice of taking strangers into your community, more specifically, into your home. Hospitality was particularly important in those days. Travel was long and dangerous, and since there was no hotel industry, no Airbnb, and often because of no fault of their own, people would find themselves in desperate situations...among all peoples and communities on Earth, philoxenia was to mark the people of God.

Deuteronomy 10 ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger residing among you, giving them food and clothing. ¹⁹ And you are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt.

This is how God describes himself: philoxenia. God says, “You were strangers in Egypt, I brought you in to know me.” The entire mission of the Jewish people was to introduce the one true God to the nations so that the nations would come in and find their home with God. How’s that for hospitality!

We get to the New Testament, and **we see in Jesus the embodiment of philoxenia**. And while God’s people were to be known for their hospitality, ironically this is one of the biggest criticisms of Jesus. In Matthew 11, the pharisees accused him of “eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.” Which is exactly what he did. **“In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal or coming from a meal.”** -Robert Karris. As a lover of a good meal and drink- I I’m a fan of this Jesus. This wasn’t just free lunch...this was a subversive act of hospitable love to those deemed unworthy of sharing the table. He loved the stranger, not just the immigrant, widows and poor, but the religious strangers- the immoral, sex workers, people considered unclean, untouchable. In some ways you could describe hospitality as the primary ministry of Jesus. **Jesus’ crucifixion is the ultimate display of philoxenia**. Jesus spends himself, he gives his greatest resource, himself to the stranger, outsider, even the enemy, in order to welcome us into the family of God and access to the eternal home of heaven. And so let’s go back to the command in Hebrews 13. **We are commanded to practice hospitality as a demonstration of the welcoming love of God.** This ought to mark our community.

The significance of loving beyond our circles

The writer of Hebrews adds to this command a curious little comment to show the surprising significance that hospitality can have. **² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.** This is a clear allusion to Genesis 18 when Abraham and Sarah practiced hospitality to three strangers, eventually realizing that two of them were angels and the third was quite possibly Jesus in pre-incarnation form? Hebrews is telling us that it is possible that the sandwich you gave to the homeless

person, the bed you provided to the weary traveler, the warm meal you brought to the widow... was actually an angel, a messenger of God. But I also think there is a deeper significance here- Remember when Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 25, "What you do for the least of these, you have done to me?" What were those things? Ordinary acts of hospitality- providing clothes, feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty a drink, inviting the strangers in... **Ordinary acts of hospitality become sacred acts of worship.** And when you invite Jesus to the table, miraculous things can happen. When you invite someone to have coffee and listen to their pain, when you host a BBQ and invite the new family on the block, when you introduce yourself to an immigrant in the grocery store and invite them to your home for dinner, when you offer a warm hot chocolate and PBJ sandwich to someone on the street... you have no idea the significance it may have in introducing them to Jesus.

The Practice of loving beyond our circles

³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

The writer expands hospitality beyond just the home and gives them a couple specific examples of how the spirit of philoxenia can be lived out in serving the imprisoned and oppressed. Jesus' disciples took this very seriously. Hospitality, in many forms became one of the key markers of the early church throughout the Roman empire. In those days, being a prisoner didn't come with three square meals, entertainment and a soft mattress to sleep on...a dirt floor and chains. Christians would bring food, clothes, and would actually stay overnight in shifts to keep prisoners company. Christians would be the first to take in strangers at the city gate. They would take in unwanted and abandoned children. During plagues, the Christians would take in the sick that even their own family would abandon. An historical argument could be made that hospitality was the primary way that the gospel spread throughout the Roman world as quickly as it did. And this is how it is spreading throughout the Middle East, Asia, Pacific Islands today.

What about us? Is this still important? I would argue the command to practice philoxenia, hospitality has never been more essential. Never more important than in the midst of hyper-individualism, physical isolation and the age of loneliness, Sociologist Robert Putnam calls it the greatest pathology of our time, where the average American has 1.8 friends¹, Never more needed than when we have removed front porches that invited the neighbors and put them in behind privacy fences in our backyards. Never more important to model family in a day when the many people grow up without any semblance of a healthy family. Never more important than in a day of pseudo-community of "anti-social media." Never more important in the day of relational distrust, tribalism and division. Never has hospitality been more important than in an age where the world, the stranger, immigrant continues to pour into our nation, community and yes, into our churches. So I want to spend the rest of the time making this very practical. Give you 2 personal ways and 2 church ways to practice hospitality.

Personal Hospitality

¹ Robert Putnam's Research

Use your home...big or small. So many of us have this false notion, that in order to do this kind of thing we have to be Martha Stewart...we have to have fine China, a big dining room table and a secret recipe passed down through the generations, a house that looks like it was designed by Chip and Joanna Gaines. That's great if you do...and invite me over. But whether it is farm-to-table homemade spread and Cabernet at an artisan table, or Top Ramen and Iced Tea around a folding table...it's ultimately not about any of that, what people will remember is your love, your interest, your kindness, your conversation...Christ in you. I've had great experiences in both settings.

"Tithe Your Time and Talents" to show hospitality. I'm borrowing this from Sam Waltz. Sam loves to use his "unique set of skills" to do pro bono work helping people who are in transitional career moments, or have fallen on hard times to put together a plan, using their assets and to help them put their best foot forward to find gainful employment. Maybe your skills lend themselves to babysitting kids, fixing stuff, sports, tutoring, helping with IT...do you know how many old ladies I meet who don't know how to use their computers or phones? Hospitality! Philip Lee likes to say, "I can't preach and I'm not a pastor but my gift is treating people for dinner."

Church:

Give to Love-In-Action. Since 2019 we have helped over 625 people with LIA, supplying about \$390,000 in support. Housing, Medical, Groceries, clothes, Transportation, Utilities, Funeral Costs, Counseling Assistance.

Engage Support Groups

Most you probably don't know this, but we have over 20 Support and Special Focus Groups serving a variety of needs in our church and community. Ministries focused on addiction help, mental illness support, financial education, helping moms, widows, writing cards of encouragement...just to name a few. Some of you are here and you may need to connect with one of these groups for support yourself, or to serve in one of them. We have a **support group fair** today for you to stop by, but it's also a visual for you to see what it looks like for the family of God to widen our circle, with a heart of hospitality.

Circle of Care: From Pastor Terry "We have walked with J and H all the way to the birth of their first child and J also successfully passing his driver's test and receiving his license! This has included many trips from the team, helping take H to prenatal visits and hosting a baby shower where some of the MOPS moms jumping in with gifts. The cool thing has been that each circle of team member has been able to step in with their gifts to walk with this family in life. Recently J has mentioned that we are truly their family. We continue to build bridges for the Gospel with this family."

ESL- Every Tuesday right here in our building. Do you know we have people from Iran, Mexico, Ukraine, Kenya, Spain, Brazil, Japan, Turkey, South Korea, Taiwan, Peru, India, Palestine...to name a few? The nations walk through our door every week. Right now child care need.

Biblical Hospitality is ultimately about introducing people to the welcoming heart of Jesus Christ. There is only one thing we are told that makes all of heaven party like it's 1999...do you know what it is? When just one lost person comes is introduced to Jesus. That's it! What if the key to that in 2022 is hospitality? The late Chuck Colson- "The world isn't reached for Christ through big evangelism rallies, but by backyards and BBQs."

Where is the spirit leading you to open your circle?

I'm moved by a unique story of hospitality from a couple in our church family. Allen and Lauren Fedale. They told me I could tell a bit of the journey. A couple they know had been struggling with pregnancy, going through multiple IVF treatments only to have heartbreaking results. While alone driving to the beach, the idea of surrogacy came to Lauren's mind. And she began to wrestle with the Lord in prayer, she said her prayers were: "I think that's such a nice idea but please not me. Someone else would be so good at it. You know how I get, I love this idea but I really don't want to, please don't choose me.." ...now you say, "See Nate, that's exactly why I don't want to open myself to the Spirit!" But listen on...As the drive continued, through gritted teeth, I asked Him to change my heart if it was His will. And He did. I don't know that I can say all my fears disappeared, but they were now challenged by my trust in Him - it was a total 180. The Spirit also got Allen on board. When their friends, who were awestruck with this act of compassion and hospitality agreed to this, the fear and panic crept in again at that point but was eventually replaced with joy at the idea – I was brought to tears and so humbled by the idea that God would chose me to live this out. I should also comment, their friends are not believers, and at this point they aren't open to faith, but Lauren said, "I hope they feel Jesus' love for them, feel his faithfulness and know that they haven't been forgotten. I hope this experience makes them question and wonder and search. Ultimately, I want them to know the Lord." They are praying and seeking opportunities, "Allen and I had the conversation of 'wouldn't it be amazing if they found Jesus through this?' Join them in prayer. Are you open to the hospitable voice of the Spirit? My lead you to fostering, or adopting like the Parnell family, Leach's and others...or to simply stop by and visit someone who is a shut-in.

What is the spirit saying to you? What will you do about it?