



Sermon Transcript September 9, 2018

Hospitable God, Hospitable People Introduction: A Practice and A Passage Hebrews 13:1-2; Isaiah 61:1-2 and 66:18-19

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 9, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Hebrews 13:1-2

¹ Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Isaiah 61:1-2

¹ The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

Isaiah 66:18-19

¹⁸ For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see my glory ¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations.

Introduction

This morning is primarily about introductions. I want to make two introductions this morning. I want to introduce you to a practice. And I want to introduce you to a passage. I want to introduce you to a “practice of the Christian faith.” And I want to introduce you to a passage of Scripture. We are going to spend this Fall season sitting in this practice and sitting in this passage.

The Christian practice I want to introduce you to this morning is the practice of Christian hospitality. On the surface, hospitality seems like a simple thing to do. It is nothing more than opening up your home and inviting your neighbor into the place where you live. And yet, what seems like a simple concept is actually quite radical. In her book on hospitality, Rosaria Butterfield describes the practice of hospitality as “radical ordinary hospitality.” It is “ordinary” in the sense that hospitality ought to be “commonplace” or “regular.” But it is “radical” because quite simply it is anything but “ordinary.” In defining the word “radical,” Butterfield says it means “to change from the root” and conjures up political and social upheaval and the kind of change that normally scares the pants off conservative Christians.”¹

David Fitch uses the word “subversive” instead of “radical” to describe the challenge ahead of us if we want to truly practice hospitality. By subversive, he means it is counter-cultural. If you want to practice hospitality, you need to go against the current of culture. That is not easy to do because we have become enculturated—we are more like our culture than we would like to admit. Recently, Bonnie and I were kayaking on the Connecticut River with some friends and there was a big difference in the amount of effort we needed to exert when we were going upstream than when we were being carried along downstream by the current. It was much harder to go against the current. If we want to practice Christian hospitality, there is a strong current in suburban America that is difficult to overcome.

In the suburbs, our homes have become our buffer from our neighbors. David Fitch says of life in the suburbs, “Each family unit is isolated in his own house with fenced in yard and automatically-opening garage that can be driven into permitting all contact with the outside world to be avoided.”² That is the current we are carried along by and we have embraced it. Admittedly, I find it inviting. It is what I know. I confess, I am enculturated. When you live in culture, it is hard to see how you are impacted by what seems normal. And yet this way of life that has characterized suburban America for decades has led to greater isolation and that alone poses a challenge to practicing

hospitality. Consequently, we have to work at it. But you may be wondering, “Why should we work at it?” “Why should I be concerned about practicing hospitality?” One reason for working at it is because hospitality is essential for the spreading of the gospel.

Fitch writes, “Christians must consistently invite our neighbors into our homes for dinner, sitting around laughing, talking, listening and asking questions of each other. The home is where we live, where we converse and settle conflict, where we raise children . . . In our homes then, strangers get full view of the message of our life . . . By inviting strangers over for dinner, we resist the fragmenting isolating forces in [suburban] America. It is so exceedingly rare, that just doing it speaks volumes as to what it means to be a Christian in a world of strangers. And yet this has proved so much harder than we ever expected.”³

And so we recognize as we get started in this series that practicing hospitality is “radical” and “subversive.” One sermon will not get to the root, nor will a series of sermons suffice. Going against the current of culture is hard and if the needle can be slightly moved over the next few months, that would be a good start. Just know, as we get started, you may feel uncomfortable as you ponder the practice of Christian hospitality. It may “scare your pants off” a little bit. But that is alright, because at the end of the day we want to be shaped by the Word of God and the gospel of Christ.

That is what brings us to our passage. This Fall season, we are going to walk through Isaiah 56-66. We are going to start next week in Isaiah 56:1 and we are going to finish with Isaiah 66:24. Why Isaiah 56-66? It is not like the focus of this passage is on the practice of hospitality. What does this section of Isaiah have to do with hospitality? What I hope you see as we make our way through these final chapters of Isaiah is that God is a hospitable God. I hope you see in time that this hospitality of God has been extended to the “stranger.” I hope you see through these passages that the world we live in is inhospitable and as the presence of Christ in this world, God’s people are to reflect that character of God to a hurting world. I hope you see through this prophetic passage that the sending of Jesus into this world is a demonstration of God’s hospitable nature. I hope you see in a new way how hospitable God has been to you and how God is moving all of time to that day when he finally brings us home.

Why should I be hospitable? Why should I examine my own heart when it comes to practicing hospitality? I can’t think of a more simple and yet profound reason than this: It is because God has been hospitable to us through Jesus and therefore we are to reflect the character of God through our hospitality to the stranger and to the neighbor.

Introductory Thoughts: The Practice of Hospitality

I would like to begin my introductory thoughts about the practice of Christian hospitality by looking at Hebrews 13:1-2. It begins with a sweeping statement that reminds us of the Great Commandment highlighted by Jesus when he was asked which of the commandments was the greatest of all. If you recall, Jesus answered by saying, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* We refer to this as part of the "irreducible core." We can do a lot of things as a church but these three things we must do. We must love God. We must love others. We must make disciples. It is our mission statement as a church. This is what we are about as a church. And so our passage begins with that sweeping statement, *"Let brotherly love continue."* That is equivalent to what Jesus said when he said, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

What does this *"brotherly love"* look like? What are some specific ways we can practice this kind of love? The very next statement out the mouth of the author of Hebrews tells us how we can express *brotherly love*. *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers."* It is interesting to note that there are two other places in the New Testament where we are commanded to extend hospitality. In Romans 12:13 we are commanded, *"seek to show hospitality."* Then in 1 Peter 4:9 we are told to *"To show hospitality to one another without grumbling."* In each case, these commands to extend hospitality are preceded by the general command to love one another. In Romans 12:10, Paul begins this section on genuine love by telling us to *"Love one another with brotherly affection."* And then in 1 Peter 4:8, with strong words, Peter commands, *"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."* And then he says, *"show hospitality to one another without grumbling."* I think we can readily conclude from these three passages that hospitality is an important expression of our love for others.

Admittedly, when I look at these commands to extend hospitality in the New Testament, it seems to me that the focus of these commands is to be hospitable to our brothers and sisters in Christ. The phrase *one another—"show hospitality to one another"* - seems to imply Christians are to open their homes to each other. Even in our passage this morning, the *stranger* could be the traveler, or even the traveling teacher. They didn't have hotels like we do today and often these missionary teachers were dependent upon the hospitality of God's people to find lodging. Jesus and the disciples were dependent on this kind of hospitality and so was Paul during his missionary journeys. So they are exhorted, *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers."*

The word *hospitality* literally means, “love of the stranger.” I think it would be rather limiting of us and even short-sighted of us if we only applied it to the Christian who was passing through our town or to a brother or sister yet unknown to us. The question Jesus was answering when he told the story of the Good Samaritan was, “*Who is my neighbor?*” Through the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was getting them to see that their neighbor was anyone in need. So it is with our love for the stranger. Even the life of Jesus illustrates the kind of hospitality Jesus is calling us to. Jesus dined with sinners. This was so much part of his habit that they said of Jesus, “*Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*” That is “love of the stranger.” That is hospitality!

I just want to pause and make an observation here. Jesus was hospitable and he didn’t own a home. Some of you are in living situations where if practicing hospitality were limited to what you do in your home, it wouldn’t apply to you. Matt Chandler addresses this when he calls us to adopt a spirit of hospitality that follows us wherever we happen to be. He encourages us to do four things: Welcome everyone you meet. Engage people. Eat with people. Love the outsider.”⁴ You don’t even need a roof over your head to do that. And yet, many of us do have a roof over our heads where we can welcome, engage, eat with and reach out to the outsider. This is the current many of us need to push against. Hospitality requires us to make a shift in how we view our homes. Instead of seeing our homes as our buffer from our neighbors, Butterfield suggests we need to see our homes as “God’s gift to use for the furtherance of his kingdom.”⁵

I recognize that I am just introducing the topic of hospitality this morning and there is much that could be said. And Lord willing, we have time over the next several weeks to continue looking at this Christian practice. But by way of introduction, I have two statements from Rosaria Butterfield’s book on hospitality I want to share with you. First of all, Butterfield defines hospitality as “using your Christian home in a daily way that seeks to make strangers neighbors and neighbors family of God.”⁶ That is helpful. Who is that “stranger on my block” that I don’t know and what can I do to be neighborly towards that person? Who is that neighbor I have come to know and what I am doing to help that person to see Christ in me and learn of Christ through me so that they can become part of the family of God? You can apply these questions wherever you go. You can go to work tomorrow with the goal of the stranger becoming your “neighbor” and the “neighbor” becoming part of the family of God. But I am asking you to consider how to use your home for such a purpose as this.

This brings us to the second statement I want to introduce you to this morning. It is

actually the title of the fourth chapter of Butterfield's book. "God never gets the address wrong." In Acts 17:26-27 it says that the place where we live is determined by God. And then Paul says, "*so that they should seek God, in the hope that they may feel their way toward him and find him.*" Here we are, sovereignly placed around people who are trying to feel their way to God. Could it be that we live where we live so that we could help our neighbors find their way to God? He concludes that verse by saying, "*Yet he is not far from each one of us.*" Our neighbors should know that God is as close to them as we are. Begin to see that the address where God has placed you is not the wrong address. That neighbor next to you and across from you and around the corner from you is not at the wrong address either. If they are a stranger to you, how can they become a neighbor to you? If they are a neighbor to you, how can they become part of the family of God with you? How can you use your home to this end? "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.*"

Pastor Mike and I met with a gentleman the other week and we heard his story. It was a riveting story. This man grew up in a home that was far from God. When he was a young boy, his family moved into a neighborhood where he met his childhood friend, who to this day remains his best friend. The family of this childhood friend welcomed this boy into their home. He went on vacations with them. He went to church with them. They helped pay for his college education. Because of the hospitality extended to this young boy, he found his way to Jesus. He has now raised a family in Christ and besides raising his four children, he and his wife have taken in a family of a single mom and three children. The impact of hospitality will have a ripple effect for the kingdom of God for generations to come. "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.*"

Introductory Thoughts: The Passage of Isaiah 56-66

This brings us to the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Whenever we come to an Old Testament prophet it can seem like we are entering foreign territory. As you read through the prophets, they can often be difficult to understand. But they are worth the effort. Do you know what they say about Isaiah? They say that the gospel is so clearly presented in Isaiah that some have labeled it "the fifth gospel." In other words, you have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—but you can add to that list the book of Isaiah. Or, some have called Isaiah the "Romans of the Old Testament." Just as the New Testament book of Romans lays out the gospel—the good news about Jesus—so does the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

Isaiah is one of four "major" prophets in the Old Testament. The "major" prophets are

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. And they are considered “major” prophets because they are long books. Isaiah has 66 chapters. It is a long book. But you could argue that Isaiah is the “grand-daddy” of the prophets. He is by far the most quoted prophet in the New Testament. He is quoted 66 times in the New Testament. Compare that to the other three “major prophets,” Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Jeremiah is quoted five times, Ezekiel is quoted two times and Daniel is quoted five times. The only book in the Old Testament quoted more in the New Testament than Isaiah is the book of Psalms.

Can I offer you a simple reason why I think Isaiah is so often quoted by the New Testament writers? It is because this book is filled with Messianic prophecies that are fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. It is a book that clearly points to Jesus. Isaiah is divided into three parts. Some even refer to these three parts of Isaiah as “the three books of Isaiah.” Each of these three sections of Isaiah tell us something about Jesus.

The first section of Isaiah is Isaiah 1-39 and in this section we learn of a child who will be born to a virgin and this child will be a king who will sit over God’s kingdom forever. You get hints here that this coming child is no normal child. It is here we read, *“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* Immanuel means “God with us.” We also read these familiar words in the first section of Isaiah, *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”* In this first section of Isaiah we get a picture of Jesus the coming king who brings the kingdom of God to earth.

But in the second section of Isaiah, we are somewhat surprised to find out how Jesus will bring this kingdom of God to us. Isaiah kind of reads like the four New Testament Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Like in these four accounts of the life of Christ, Isaiah begins by announcing the coming king and the coming kingdom of God. That was the message Jesus preached when he began his ministry, *“The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel.”* But then the next thing you know is that Jesus is telling his disciples about the cross and his need to die on the cross. That is what you discover about the coming Messiah in the second section of Isaiah: Isaiah 40-55. Here we are introduced to a coming servant through “four servant songs” the final one being Isaiah 52-53 where we read of this coming servant, *“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace*

was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” It kind of reminds you of what Jesus said of himself in Mark 10:45 when he said, *“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* So in the second section of Isaiah we find that Jesus the King is also the Savior who dies for us and atones for our sin.

This brings us to the final section of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66. This is where we are going to sit for the coming Fall season. It is a section that ends with a new heaven and a new earth. I like what it says in Isaiah 66:18, *“the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see my glory.”* So the end of this third section points to a time yet to come. So this section portrays Jesus as the Anointed Conqueror who will someday make all things new. It began with his resurrection from the dead. It continues through the proclamation of the gospel and how God is bringing people to himself from every corner of the globe. And someday, all of creation will be renewed.

Do you know what that tells us about Isaiah 56-66? It is a passage of Scripture sandwiched between the cross and the return of Jesus. In other words, the “stuff” of Isaiah 56-66 is a description of the age in which we currently live—between the cross and the return of Jesus. In his commentary, Alec Motyer says we can describe Isaiah 56-66 with this title: “characteristics of a waiting people.”⁷ And furthermore, this people of God that is waiting is a “world-wide people.”

So what do we do while we wait for Jesus, the “Anointed Conqueror” to once and for all put an end to suffering and death? I am going to suggest to you through this series that one of our key activities while we wait is to practice hospitality. By way of introduction, consider these two passages from this third section of Isaiah.

The first passage is Isaiah 61:1-2. It should be somewhat familiar to you because it is the passage Jesus quoted at the beginning of his ministry when he read from Isaiah in the synagogue. When he finished, he rolled up the scroll and said, *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* In other words, Jesus was saying to those gathered for worship, “this passage is about me.” And so he read, *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.”* It is a passage that tells us that God sent someone to not just announce good news but someone who is actually able to deliver good news. And he went to the poor and to the brokenhearted and to the captive and to the imprisoned and to those who mourn. He went to them. He came to us.

John tells us that this Jesus who was God took on human flesh and dwelt among us. I like the way Eugene Peterson says it in *The Message*. “The Word became flesh and blood and he moved into the neighborhood.” He lived among us. Behind those nicely painted doors in your neighborhood are stories of people in poverty and brokenhearted and captive and imprisoned. There are many ways you can take those words and apply them. But like Jesus, while we wait, we too “move into the neighborhood.” We move towards people through our hospitality.

Then I love the picture we get from Isaiah 66:18-19. He acknowledges that “*the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues.*” And when he gathers them from the four corners of the earth, “*they shall come and see my glory.*” Then he says in verse 19, “*I will set a sign among them.*” Motyer suggests that this *sign* “can only be his cross . . . The world finds common cause round a sign the Lord sets among them.”⁸ And then you see this incredible missionary impulse, “*And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations.*” In other words, there is no place beyond the reach of the gospel. And furthermore, the ability to get this done does not and can not rest on one person. People are sent from all over the world. Just like Isaiah said in Isaiah 6, “*Here am I! Send me!*” - now many are sent. We all are sent.

The temptation is to just read foreign missions into this passage. But the epicenter in this passage is Jerusalem. We are part of the *coastlands afar off*. It is not to say that this verse can’t give us a missionary impulse to go to other lands. But *declaring God’s glory among the nations* to people who do not know his fame is as close to those living next door to you. In fact, while mission trips are good, we can often be guilty of doing something “over there” - wherever over there happens to be—at the neglect of what we should be doing right here in our own neighborhoods. It can be as simple as beginning with hospitality—helping strangers become neighbors and neighbors become family.

Introductory Thoughts: First Steps

So as we get started, let me suggest a few things to help us think about hospitality.

First of all, consider reading Isaiah 56-66. Perhaps you could read it weekly throughout this series. Or you can read a chapter a day and when you finish, start over. Know going into it that some of it will be confusing and a little fuzzy to you. At the same, you will pick up some of the characteristics of a waiting people.

Secondly, start praying for your neighbors. Ask God to show who the “strangers” are to you and ask God to help them become “neighbors.” Perhaps God will lay a specific person on your heart and consider what you can do to make connection with that neighbor. Then pray for those who are “neighbors” that God would use you to make Jesus known to them so that they too can become family. Prayer is vital to all of this.

Finally, accept the fact that until God moves you, he has you where he wants you. God never gets the address wrong. So that means you are in the right place right now. You have been sovereignly planted next to the people God has put around you. Like Jesus, you have been sent to your neighborhood. If the gospel can spread to every corner of the globe, it can spread to the corners of your street. May it be true someday on our streets that those who have not heard of the fame or seen the glory of Jesus would one day join us to *declare his glory among the nations*.

It begins with hospitality. *“Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.”*

¹Rosaria Butterfield *The Gospel Comes with A House Key* ((Wheaton: Crossway, 2018)

²David Fitch “The Brutal ‘Burbs: How the suburban lifestyle undermines our missions” in Christianity Today, April, 2006 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/april-online-only/brutal-burbs-how-suburban-lifestyle-undermines-our-mission.html>

³Ibid

⁴Matt Chandler “Hospitality is Courageous” www.thegospelcoalition.org April 13, 2018

⁵Butterfield, Kindle Location 105

⁶Ibid., Kindle Location 402

⁷Alec Motyer *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 461

⁸Motyer, 541

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Reflecting back on this summer, share something that was a “highlight” and share something that was a “challenge.”
2. As you get started as a group this Fall, what commitments do you want to make to each other? In what way would you like to see the group grow (e.g. prayer, caring for each other, hospitality, reaching out, or something else)
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Hebrews 13:1-2, Romans 12:9-13; 1 Peter 4:8-9. What comes to mind when you think of hospitality? What makes practicing hospitality difficult in your life?
5. Read Luke 10:25-37—the story of the Good Samaritan. How does this story take the spirit of hospitality outside of the home into everyday life? Where are the places where you can bring that hospitable spirit? A spirit that welcomes—engages—eats with—loves the outsider.
6. Read Isaiah 61:1-2. When you think of your neighborhood, how do you see signs of a broken world? How does it encourage you to know that God doesn’t get the address wrong?
7. Read Isaiah 66:18-19. How does this passage help you know what to pray for your neighbors and for your role in your neighborhood?

Taking It Home

8. Share ideas on how to help “strangers to become neighbor and neighbors to become family.”