

Extreme Hospitality
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Introduction: Our reactions to strangers

Have any of you seen the movie, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding?” In this film, there is a proud father, a Greek immigrant to America, who runs a family owned restaurant in Chicago, and explains to anyone who will listen to him that all the great ideas originated with the Greeks, and how all words can be traced to Greek roots, much to the embarrassment of his teen-age daughter. **Take a look. – show video.**

In the spirit of the proud Greek father in the film, I want us to take a look at two more Greek words. The first is Xenophobia. Now that comes from two Greek words, xenos and phobia, stranger and fear. So xenophobia is the fear of strangers.

The next word is Philoxenia; again, from two Greek words, love/friendship and stranger. So Philoxenia is the “love of the stranger”. And the most common translation of the philoxenia into English is Hospitality.

My mother used to tell me that when I was young I did not know a stranger. I guess that would have made me philoxenic. This topic usually came up in conversation when we were discussing the differences between me and my little brother, who, when he was young, never spoke, and is still a very introverted man. I guess we could call him, xenophobic. My mother would say something like this to me, “You know, one of the reasons your brother is the way he is is because someone would ask you a question and you’d answer, then they would ask your brother a question and you’d answer!” I’d just say, “That’s because he refused to answer for himself!”

Finally, one day a conversation like this was happening and I just said, “No, mom, he’s an adult now. It’s not my fault that he still doesn’t talk. He knows how to use words. It’s time for him to change!” And to his credit, I can now get a few sentences out of him at family gatherings.

And as I was remembering this story, I realized that I have changed too. I am no longer the boy who didn’t know a stranger. I can be quite introverted. I can be very uninterested in the strangers around me. And it no longer is easy for me to start up conversations with people I don’t know. What used to seemingly come naturally is now a difficult and tiring thing for me to do.

So I ask myself, why has my attitude toward strangers changed? And you know there could be lots of reasons; less trusting of people and more cautious; maybe I just don’t want to extend the energy because I already know a lot of people; who knows. But I do know this. I am aware that my attitude toward strangers is not just about acknowledging or speaking to them, it includes judging them. And, in the quick judgments, I create a spectrum of my response. And the scale goes from “ignoring completely – as if they don’t exist – to being willing to help or serve them.” There is inside of me a struggle between being xenophobic and philoxenic!

Just like many of you, life has taught me some hard lessons about trusting people, so when I encounter certain situations with strangers, there’s an alarm that goes off in my head, “Danger Will Robinson”. You know what I’m talking about? But at other times, I am willing to

go out of my way to help a perfect stranger. So I wrestle with my responses in different situations and with the judgments that I make. And I wrestle with this because you know, the Bible has a lot to say about how we interact with strangers, as individuals and as a community. And that's what we're going to explore as we spend this time together.

Before we go any further, though, would you just join me in a prayer?

Lord, I trust that you have been in the preparation that has led up to this moment. And I know that you are here with us now, in this moment. I want to invite you to teach me, Lord, and guide me. And may the time we spend together today be an experience of your love, your grace, and your call. Grow in us today. And may what we share in these moments have eternal value by leading us to transform our world through our ministries here at Saint Paul's. Amen.

The Biblical Picture of Extreme Hospitality.

As I mentioned, the Bible has a lot to say about the way we treat strangers. Both the Old and New Testaments have significant passages about hospitality. From early on in the Old Testament, God communicates to his people that hospitality, welcoming the stranger, is important to God. He wants this to be one of the defining characteristics of his people. It is to be part of the DNA of the community of faith.

1. Why extend hospitality?

In Genesis 18, God shows up to Abraham as a stranger. God has a message for Abraham that his aged wife, Sarah, will become pregnant and they will have a son, which fulfills a previous promise that God had made to Abraham. But Abraham only receives the message because he welcomed the strangers into his house. Not only did Abraham welcome them, he showed them some EXTREME hospitality. First he offered them water and a place to rest. Then he had a calf butchered to feed them, and had bread baked for them!

What is maybe most interesting about this story to me, is that the scripture gives us a hint that as Abraham saw the strangers approaching, he already had a hunch that welcoming the strangers meant that he was welcoming the Lord.

Interesting. Jesus said something like that. It's in Matthew's gospel, the 25th chapter. Jesus is telling a parable about what the children of God really look like. In the story, all the people are of the world are separated into two groups. And one of the groups is addressed by the Lord like this...*"I will bless you because you have been a blessing. You have lived the kind of life that reflects my love and my character. I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me...."*

And of course the people in the story didn't understand. "When Lord, When?"

And the Lord says, *"When you fed anyone who was hungry, you fed me. When you welcomed any stranger, you welcomed me."* (Matthew 25:31-46)

The author of Hebrews was writing to a Jewish Christian church and he picks this up also. Most of the letter is explaining how the symbols and practices of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the life and resurrection of Jesus. Now by and large, the churches that were made up of people who grew up in the Jewish faith had issues about welcoming non-Jews into their circle. So do you know what the author says to this church? *"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."*
Hebrews 13:2

This is big, people, this is big! As I let my mind run through the places where God either promises or seems to show up they are, to my recollection: **[slide list- title as “places where God shows up”]** **1. Worship** – Where two or three are gathered in my name. **2. Present in us, through the Holy Spirit.** **3. In the strangers.** **4. In the outcasts and marginalized.**

This may be a bit of an understatement, but since God is very likely to show up as the stranger in our midst, I think that makes hospitality fairly important! And Abraham demonstrated a hospitality that was above and beyond expectations, an extreme hospitality.

2. The Extreme Hospitality of Jesus

The entire ministry of Jesus was one of welcoming strangers. Story after story in the gospels, Jesus is encountering one stranger after another. The rich and the poor; the healthy and the sick; the insider and the outcast; keepers of the law and the sinners; they all came. He encountered strangers of every type.

Now Jesus' hospitality was different than Abraham's. Abraham's was at his house. Jesus was always on the move. Abraham's extreme hospitality was setting a feast in front of his guests. Jesus' hospitality was extreme in a different sense. It was excessively open, excessively embracing and engaging.

As I looked through some stories of Jesus' encounters with strangers, I noticed that there are some common characteristics of those encounters. Almost every time Jesus encountered a stranger, his hospitality included these three things.

[slide – Jesus' extreme hospitality]

a. met people where they were (acceptance and listening)

b. He addressed their needs, not their wants. There was only one time in Jesus life that he allowed the strangers to use him or abuse him for their own gain, and that was at the cross. And in the end, he turned that around on them for God's gain.

c. He leads them to a new place in God's love. A place of forgiveness, healing, challenge. Advances the relationship with God.

Seems pretty simple, huh? That's extreme hospitality? Well, yeah. And here's what's extreme about it. It's extreme because Jesus extended it to everyone. Still does. Even to people who set off the “Danger Will Robinson” alarms in us.

See, people matter to God....ALL people. And if people matter to God, then they should matter to us!

Doing Extreme Hospitality

So how do we live out this extreme hospitality, both as individuals and as a community?

In my experience Saint Paul's is one of the most hospitable congregations I've worked with. As a whole, this church has a great attitude about welcoming guests. But I have a worry streak in me, and I fear that on any given day a guest could come and go on a Sunday without getting one sign or one clue that they are valued and accepted. Even worse, they could get a message that they are not wanted here. I have seen it happen in lots of different places. I've even been a contributor to the problem before.

Have you ever been in a social setting where you walk in and you don't know anyone? But everyone else seems to know each other? Like maybe you're meeting someone there but they haven't arrived yet? I just want to turn and run!

What difference does it make if just one person out of that crowd notices you, welcomes you and introduces you to a few people?

Now imagine this? You've decided to go to a church – maybe for the first time in a long time. You're not looking to find 20 new best friends, just looking for someone to be glad that you're there...a little acceptance tucked inside the anonymity you want to maintain. What difference does it make if just one person noticed you...if just one person seemed glad that you were there? One person took initiative to introduce themselves to you? It makes all the difference in the world!

Part of our plan to extend extreme hospitality as a church is obviously to focus on our guests. If you've come to Saint Paul's for more than a few weeks, you've probably learned by necessity where the basics are; coffee, bathrooms, nursery, etc. But if you're a guest for the first time, you don't know any of those things. And did you know that most visitors to a church make up their mind about coming back in the first ten minutes. Sometimes that's even before we get to the first song!

That's why it is very important for us as a church to implement the first principle we learned from Jesus: Meet people where they are. Extreme hospitality does not make a guest struggle to understand us (repeat).

Again, a scene from My Big Fat Greek Wedding comes to mind. The Greek daughter is marrying a non-Greek man and their families meet for the first time. There's just a little trouble understanding each other as these two cultures collide. Take a look!

"There's a hole in this cake!" I love that. When a guest comes to Saint Paul's we want to do everything we can to create an environment that says, "You're valued here. You're accepted here. You're important to us!" So we want to do everything we can to clearly communicate to everyone that they are welcome here. And while that job belongs to all of us equally, we have created a new ministry called First Impressions to help us with our front line hospitality.

Now the goal of First Impressions is really about fulfilling this first principle of meeting people where they are. We want to make a guest feel valued in the first 10 minutes. We want people to be impressed that we care about them. We want to "wow" them. Not with high tech stuff or over the top displays that are hokey. We simply want to be prepared for them. We want them to know that we were expecting them, prepared for them and willing to do whatever we can to make their first experience here pleasant and easy.

It's about paying attention to the little things. Our team spreads out over the building to make sure that everyone gets a nice warm welcome and hello as they enter, and to be easily accessible if someone needs directions. It's about the little things; like during worship our team is setting up soul café, cleaning and straightening, picking up trash in the halls.

I want you to hear a story about how a couple members of our team made a big impression taking care of a little detail several weeks back.

Video of Todd Taylor

That was Todd Taylor, and he's the director of our Children's ministry. I know that he is not a first time guest, but he is a little strange.... No, he's an amazing man who loves God and loves children and is doing an excellent ministry. But our team made a special impression on Todd that day because they cleaned the bathroom in the children's wing. The bathrooms were clean to start the day, but do you know what a bathroom looks like after dozens of children go through it? Especially the boys? See, Todd knows that something like clean

bathrooms for children matters. It tells the children and their parents that their kids are important to us, that we care, that we are expecting them.

Our first impression teams are about helping us live out the first principle of Jesus' extreme hospitality; meeting people where they are. I believe that making people feel accepted and valued as they enter the building (or even before) opens up the possibility for the other two principles of Jesus' extreme hospitality to be fulfilled through worship. First Impressions wants guests to already have experienced God's acceptance of them so that when they experience worship their hearts are ready to allow Jesus to meet their spiritual needs, and lead them from where they were when they came in to a new place in God's love.

We only have enough volunteers currently to have our First Impression teams in place for two weeks of the month. We'd love to have 30 more people offer to serve for the entire Sunday morning for one month (or every other week at Mosaic) so we can put this ministry in place every week. And you can respond on the friendship form, or by going to the info desk and signing up there.

Now there are other ministries that I want to give a shout out to. Talk about meeting people where they are, meeting their needs, and helping them to move to a new place in God's love...the Salvage Yard is doing exactly that! And I am so excited about their upcoming Grand Opening. It's next Thurs, Fri and Sat nights.

Alpha is another ministry that follows this model from Jesus. And hundreds of people have been moved by God's love to a new place in life through this tremendous ministry that meets people where they are.

While we have these ministries that are more focused on hospitality, the truth is that the ministry of hospitality belongs to all of us! And you know and I know that Saint Paul's may not be the church for everyone. There could be lots of reasons why. But my prayer is that even though Saint Paul's may not be the church for everyone, everyone who comes here will be able to say, "I felt accepted there. I felt like it mattered to them that I was there."

I want every person who comes to Saint Paul's to be able to say, "I was a stranger and they welcomed me." And that happens when we all own a part of extending extreme hospitality to our guests here at Saint Paul's and to the strangers we meet in our life journeys.

And I think hospitality has to be lived out by us as individuals by following Jesus' model as best as we can. We need to ask God to give us grace, patience and courage to be open and aware of the strangers around us, meet them where they are; help them get their deepest needs fulfilled through Christ, and lead them to a new place in God's love.

Remember that God is very likely to show up as a stranger in our midst. So don't forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some have entertained angels without knowing it.