

Heaven's Secrets: Hospitality

When the doorbell rang yesterday morning Jill and I looked at each other with faces that said, "Who in the world?" When the person started knocking, I started toward the door because Jill, standing there in her pajamas, was clearly not making a move. I was in my Badger pajamas, with my signature morning Einstein hairdo, which Jill said looked fine (barely suppressing her laughter.) I cautiously approached the stranger at our front door, wondering who in the world would darken our door on a COVID-confined Saturday morning. There she stood: my sister. With food in her hand. She took one look at me and, to her credit, she did not run. But she did say, looking over her shoulder at the driveway making sure her car was still safely in getaway mode, "Here's some food. I had better not come in." "Yes, that would not be best", I agreed.

How do you approach the stranger at your door? Our instinctive response is to hope they go away. That's why the Benedictine monks made a rule about how to answer the door at their monasteries.

Martin Copenhaver relates rationale for the ancient Rule of St. Benedict's instructions for the porter in charge of answering the monastery door: "The way we answer doors is the way we deal with the world."

The porter is instructed to offer a welcome to anyone who knocks, before knowing who it is, in Benedict's words, "with all the gentleness that comes from reverence of God," and "with the warmth of love." As soon as anyone knocks, the porter is to reply, "Thanks be to God. Your blessing, please."

Which greeting at the door do you think represents the kind of hospitality Jesus wants us to extend to strangers, the 'Benedictine gentleness' or the 'hide and hope they go away' response?

The answer is obvious to you, right? Do you know what that tells you about you? That you get it, what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples in his last great story about the traits of those who aspire to be kingdom citizens.

In this series we studied traits which Jesus says we should make a part of our lives. We strive to be forgiving, generous, repenting, fruit-bearing, inviting, allegiant, servants who are humble, watchful, faithful and hospitable.

Genuine hospitality encompasses all of these traits. True hospitality, for example, only happens when we are forgiving and generous toward strangers, and so forth with each one.

Matthew 25:31 ff. should not be heard as a warning to God's children who have been saved by faith. No, it is glorious affirmation, a confirmation that you are welcome in the kingdom.



It is the hospitable who hear the words of wonderful welcome in Matthew 25:34.

Jesus makes it clear what he is looking for in our lives in Matthew 25:35-36. But do you notice the surprise of the servants in their reply (37-39)? They don't realize that they have been offering hospitality to Jesus. So, Jesus tells them straight out (v. 40).

Of course, the word hospitality is not seen anywhere in these verses is it? But that's what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is saying that those for whom a place in the kingdom has been prepared can know the deep and abiding assurance of God's adoption of them as his children by considering how they live. Their genuine hospitality is not a *cause* of their having a place in the kingdom; it is *evidence* that they have mansion in the kingdom. As one commentator puts it, "Their works are the fruit, not the root, of grace...to God alone be the glory!"

So, how should we understand what it means to show this kind of hospitality? Does it mean that we need to answer the door in our pj's? Let's hope not, right? Me greeting someone in my PJ's and Einstein hair is hardly a gracious welcome.



I find it helpful to think about Christian hospitality by considering its vocabulary cousin: 'hospital.' The original meaning of the word from which we get 'hospital' was 'hostile' or 'stranger.' In other words, a hospital was a place where strangers, travelers going through a strange land, could find a room and meal. The meaning expanded to indicate a place where anyone who is sick can find healing. Everyone is welcome.

So how are a church and its people like a hospital? Well, you probably have heard it said, 'A church is not a museum for saints. It is a hospital for sinners.' That much is true. We welcome everyone who comes here wanting the healing power and grace of God in Christ. Or at least that is what we should strive to be.

But how about in this pandemic time? How can we be a hospital for sinners when our doors are effectively closed? Well, what comes to my mind is 'Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH)', United States Army medical units serving as a fully functional hospital in a combat area of operations.

So here is my point. The church building is closed, but the church is open for business. The combat zone, where the battle of good and evil, love and hate, rages is wherever you live, work, play, shop. We are sent into the world like field medics to offer healing, to be the 'hospital' for strangers where they are, offering them heaping plates of God's love, to show them that love in very practical ways of daily living.

You maybe know that a daughter of our church, Autumn Van Der Puy, is a Navy medic. I asked her how about her job, and this is what she wrote to me:

'My Role as a medic for the Navy is to deliver quality advanced first aid to anyone that needs it, whether it be at a hospital or on a ship or with a marine unit. After boot camp we get baseline training. This is the very basic training that every medic must be competent in.'

That's the point! We offer first aid to anyone that needs it. Our baseline training is suffering through my sermons, doing your personal Bible reading and prayer and Christian conversation. The purpose of the training is to prepare us for the combat zone of life, where we can be MASH units bringing grace to someone's life by welcoming them in simple ways, with a place to stay, with a

meal to eat, with a coat to wear. You do this in your work and in your gifts to our local mission. That is evidence of your citizenship in the kingdom. Really!

I was speaking with someone who was concerned that they were not doing enough to prove their value to Jesus. I asked this person where they had been just before our meeting, and they told me, 'Oh, I was handing out food at a food pantry.' They might as well have said, 'When did we see you hungry and feed you?', right?

Why do people fill boxes for children thousands of miles away? Why do people stand outside on a cold December night to assist in the raising of funds for another organization, one to which they do not even belong? Why do they spend hours fixing up a house not their own for no pay? All of these things, and so many more, are done by the people of Hope Church not to cause Jesus to welcome them into his kingdom, but rather as offers of proof that God, in his grace, has already included them in the kingdom, evidence that they are deserving of praise; the fruit, not the root, of God's grace.

Jesus says to you, look at the evidence, and know that there is a place reserved for you in the kingdom. Look at the evidence of the simple ways your life serves Jesus. Start celebrating the King's welcome!

Let's learn from another lesson from our frontline health care workers today though. It is not easy work. It will not gain the world's applause. Oh, maybe for a time, but then the world moves its applause to the next thing. It takes patience, persistence and prayer to serve the needy when no one is watching, to see the face of Jesus in the ones we quietly serve.

Patricia L. Miller writes: While at work in the emergency room, I learned to stop crying at the pain around me.... Five years of emergency room exposure had taken its toll. Then God intervened.

I was taking information for registering a young woman who had overdosed on drugs and had attempted suicide. Her mother sat before me as I typed the information into the computer. The mother was unkempt and bleary eyed. She had been awakened in the middle of the night by the police to come to the hospital. She could only speak to me in a whisper.

Hurry up, I said to myself, as she slowly gave me the information. My impatience was raw as I finished the report and jumped to the machine to copy the medical cards. That's when God stopped me—at the copy machine. He spoke to my heart so clearly: *You didn't even look at her*. He repeated it, gently: *You didn't even look at her*.

I felt his grief for her and for her daughter, and I bowed my head. *I'm sorry, Lord. I am so sorry.*

I sat down in front of the distraught woman and covered her hands with mine. I looked into her eyes with all the love that God could flood through me and said, "I care. Don't give up."

She wept and wept. She poured her heart out to me about the years of dealing with a rebellious daughter as a single mom. Finally, she looked up and thanked me....

My attitude changed that night.... Jesus came into the hospital to set me free to care again. He gave himself to that woman through me. My God, who so loved the world, broke that self-imposed barrier around my heart. Now he could reach out, not only to me in my pain, but to a lost and hurting woman.

Friends, you and I are called to show genuine hospitality by opening the door of our hearts, welcoming everyone with whom we live and work and serve to know that someone cares, that someone is really listening, someone who will put down the phone, turn off the tablet or television, look into someone's face with an expression that says, "I see you, Jesus."

The door to my heart is open, Jesus. Won't you please come in?