

CATCH: Inventive Hospitality

Matthew 11:28-30

We have ways to welcome people well.

A sermon preached by
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There was a couple who had been married quite a while. Over breakfast one morning, the wife said to her husband, “I bet you don't remember what day this is.”

“Of course, I do!” he replied indignantly, and got up to go to work. Of course, he had no clue what day it was. But he wasn't going to let that stop him. About 10 o'clock that morning, there was a knock on the door, and the florist delivered a big bouquet of flowers. In the bouquet there was a gift card to the wife's favorite clothes store. So after lunch, she went shopping. When her husband got home that evening, he walked in with a big box of his wife's favorite chocolates. “Have you had a good day?” he said with a smile.

She replied, “First flowers, then a new dress, and now chocolates! I don't know when I've had a better Groundhog Day!”

I hope you're having a great Groundhog Day today. Groundhog Day originated among German immigrants in Pennsylvania in the late 1800's from traditions they brought over from Germany. The center of Groundhog Day celebrations is in the little town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where sometimes 40,000 people will show up to see whether the town groundhog, always named Punxsutawney Phil, will come out and see his shadow. If Phil sees his shadow, there is supposed to be six more weeks of winter; if there is no shadow, there will be an early spring. In the hundred-plus years they have been observing Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Phil has been accurate 39% of the time.¹

Groundhog Day has also taken on an additional connotation because of a movie released in 1993 starring Bill Murray. In the “Groundhog Day” movie, Bill Murray is a TV weatherman who is first cursed with covering the Puxsutawney festivities, then is cursed with repeating Groundhog Day over and over. Spoiler alert: He eventually gets out of the repetitive experience and gets the girl. But since then, any repetitive experience has been known as “Groundhog Day.”²

Today is sort of a “Groundhog Day” sermon. Most of what I am going to say today you have heard before. This is not new information. But it is important information, and it bears repeating. It's like telling your spouse

or your kids that you love them. Just because you have said it once does not mean it should not be repeated frequently.

We are in the middle of a sermon series called “Catch.” We are talking about being a hospitable and welcoming congregation. We are talking about actually sharing our faith with others and inviting them into our church and into a relationship with Jesus Christ. We started by talking about being “relentlessly outward focused.” The playing field, if you will, of our ministry is outside the church, out in the community, out in the world, where people have needs and are not part of a church family.

Then we talked about Three Questions that we have to answer to know why we are taking our message of love to the world: Why do people need Jesus? Why do people need the church? Why do people need *this* church? You got the answers to those questions last week, right? (If you didn’t, go to the website or subscribe to our podcast.)

Today we are talking about living out the call to be a welcoming and hospitable church—putting the theory into practice. Let’s look at the why, the how, and the what of Christian hospitality.

Why do we need to be hospitable? What’s the point of welcoming people? Is it just to ensure our institutional survival? Is it just to make sure we have enough people to provide a financial base to take care of our buildings, staff, and programs? No, it goes much deeper than that.

We want to welcome people because people have a deep desire to belong. Humans have a deep psychological and spiritual need to connect with other humans. That’s why the “Cheers” sitcom ran so long on television a few years ago. We all long to have a place “where everybody knows your name.” Sociologists call this the “third place.” We have a home, and we have work, but we need a third place to connect with people outside of our home and work. People will find a bar or a club or a social group to provide that outlet. The church can be a “third place” for people who want to connect. But the great thing about the church is that in this place we can also connect with God.

We want to welcome people because Jesus put a high value on welcoming people. In his parable of the great dinner in Luke 14, Jesus is the master throwing a big party for his friends. But all the initial guest list

makes excuses about why they can't come. So the master sends his servants to invite "*the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame,*"³ then to go further into the roads and lanes to compel people to come to the party, so that the master's house will be full. Jesus wants us all at the table. We want to welcome well because Jesus wants us to.

But perhaps most of all, we want to be hospitable to outsiders because they are weary and burdened, lost and alone, hurting and broken. The love of Jesus in us compels our compassion. They need to know the comforting grace of Jesus, just like we do.

In our Scripture text today, Jesus is on a preaching tour in Galilee, and apparently it is not going well. Earlier in the chapter, he compares people to children playing in the marketplace, finding fault with whatever the messengers from God are saying and doing. Then he berates the three towns in Galilee where he has been preaching—Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum—because they have apparently turned a deaf ear or at least an apathetic ear to his message. Jesus prays, and he says he is actually thankful to God that the wise and intelligent people are being blinded to the truth, and only those who approach him with a child-like attitude are getting what he is saying.

Then the mood shifts, and Jesus offers this heartfelt invitation, and in the context, it is almost heart-breaking. "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"⁴ As he does many times, Jesus uses an image to convey his truth. The oxen used for plowing the fields in Jesus' time were fitted with a yoke so they could pull the plow. If the yoke fit well, it was said to be "easy." It made the burden of pulling the plow lighter on the ox.

Jesus is not saying there is nothing to it to follow him. But he is saying that compared to the burdens and the weariness of living outside of a relationship to God, the burden of discipleship is easy. It is light. It feels like freedom. It gives your soul rest.

That's the invitation we have to share with the world. If someone is feeling the weariness and the burden of grief or illness or loneliness or

estrangement or the pain of a life that is just not working out, we have some relief to offer. Jesus can help. The church can be supportive. People in the deep troubles of life can find love and strength and hope. That's why we try to be hospitable.

So how do we do that? That's the second question today. How do we encourage hospitality in our church? How do we build a better welcome? We have talked about this before under the phrase "radical hospitality." Bishop Robert Schnase wrote a book called *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, and one of the practices is radical hospitality, which he defines this way: "Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ."⁵

Our unfortunate tendency as human beings is to bond together to the exclusion of others. We like the people we know. Unintentionally, we put up walls around our groups because we are more comfortable with the known rather than the unknown. We may even consider ourselves friendly, and we are—to every one who is already a friend.

True Christian hospitality requires an intentional attitude that makes inviting and welcoming the stranger a top priority. Schnase says, "Hospitality is a quality of spiritual initiative, the practice of an active and genuine love, a graciousness unaffected by self-interest, an opening of ourselves and our faith community to receive others. When the spirit of Christ's hospitality pervades a congregation, then every choir, youth ministry, adult Sunday School class, mission team, Bible study, and outreach ministry regularly asks itself, 'How are we doing at inviting others and supporting newcomers into our part of the church family? And how can we improve?'"⁶

How do we welcome better? We need to see all the aspects of our ministry through the eyes of a first-time guest in our church. Then we try to make sure that there are no barriers—in fact that there is strong encouragement—to participate in the ministries that are offered. The "Catch" material outlines some best practices in terms of invitational ministry, most of which we do, and all of which we could do better.

Hospitable churches have good signage around their church or campus. They wear nametags for the sake of those who don't know them. Hospitality starts in the parking lot as people get out of their cars and need to know where to go. Hospitable churches have a connection point, a central location or two where people can get information about the church. They have coffee and refreshments for members and guests to help fellowship together. They make sure child care is safe, clean and inviting for young families who bring children. We know all that. We do most of that. We could do all of it better. How are you involved in those ministries of hospitality? It's a call for every member of the church.

Finally today, what are we trying to accomplish by welcoming people into the church? What do we expect or desire or hope for a person who comes into our fellowship? Schnase said it: "to find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ."⁷ We want people to come to know the love, grace, peace and joy that we have come to know in Jesus Christ. We want people to be saved from their sins, to be released from bondage, to be free to love and serve others in Jesus' name. We know that this is what life at its best is all about, and we want to share that life with others. We want to see lives transformed.

If you watch the Super Bowl today, you may recall a play that some have called the greatest Super Bowl play ever. In 2008, the New York Giants played the New England Patriots for the NFL football championship. Late in the fourth quarter, the Giants were making a last-ditch effort to overcome the highly-favored Patriots. Eli Manning, the Giants' quarterback, dropped back to pass and was immediately surrounded by three Patriot defenders. Miraculously, he escaped their grasp and rolled out to his right. He flung the ball far downfield to a receiver named David Tyree. Tyree had made four catches all year. He was double covered. But when the ball came sailing in, he jumped up and pinned the ball to the top of his helmet with one hand. On the way to the ground, he got another hand on it and held on for a reception. That play ignited the Giant offense, and they went on to score a touchdown, which defeated the New England Patriots 17-14.

In the subsequent fame from the Super Bowl, David Tyree had the opportunity to tell his story. Though he was immensely talented, Tyree was

addicted to alcohol and marijuana from his teenage years. He managed to make it through college and was drafted by the Giants to play professionally. But his rookie season with the Giants in 2003, Tyree was arrested on a drug charge. His pregnant girlfriend threatened to leave him, and Tyree said, “I had no peace. My life was in disarray.”

But his girlfriend had a Bible, and at the end of his rope, David Tyree sat down and began to read the story of God’s grace and redemption. He decided that day to quit drinking. He found a church that welcomed him well. He got married to his girlfriend. Today Tyree still works for the Giants organization; he is the father of seven children; and he runs a ministry for troubled kids in his hometown. And he made the greatest catch in Super Bowl history! Looking back on his life, David Tyree says, “It’s more than just a feel-good story. It’s about destiny and purpose.”⁸

This is our destiny. This is our purpose. To welcome people well, so that they might find a transformational relationship with Jesus Christ. Today, everyone is invited to share in the hospitality of grace around the Lord’s Table. Come and taste God’s love. Go to share that love with God’s children who cross your path daily. Invite and welcome people well, and you will become an agent of transformation.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day_(film)).

³ Luke 14:21.

⁴ Matthew 11:28-30.

⁵ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 11.

⁶ Schnase, 20.

⁷ Schnase, 11.

⁸ “Tyree’s Big Comeback,” *The Week* (3-29-08), p. 10.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Tyree.