

Welcome! I am so glad you are here. I wish we could all sit together around this table for the next few minutes, but since we can't, I'm inviting you to pull up a chair and imagine we are here together. Today we are going to talk about hospitality, and in my mind, there is no greater image of hospitality than pulling up another chair to the table where there is room for everyone, where everyone has a place, and everyone is fed. As we begin, let's invite God to join us at our table.

### PRAY

Hospitality is a bedrock practice for followers of Jesus. Throughout the Bible the people of God are expected to practice hospitality. Romans 12:13 tells us to "always be eager to practice hospitality" and Hebrews 13:2 reminds us "do not forget to show hospitality to strangers." But what exactly is hospitality? And how are we to practice it? This is what we are going to explore today.

So as we begin, I want you to think about what comes to mind when you think of hospitality. Type into the chat what comes to mind when you think of this word. ... everyone involved - kids and teens, you too!

What exactly is hospitality? Some of you might imagine dinners in elegant homes, with elaborate tables and chef-inspired meals. Others might think of the hospitality industry – of that beautiful hotel or resort you visited in pre-Covid times, and are dreaming of visiting again. Some might recall being invited to a backyard BBQ (remember those days??) Kids, you might be thinking of being invited to a birthday party or having to help clean the house before people come over! Today, we are going to imagine a different kind of hospitality – a broad and more generous hospitality in which we are invited to partner with God in blessing our world.

The definition of hospitality that I am working with today is this: hospitality is “making space to welcome a stranger with God’s loving welcome.” Let’s break this into three phrases. First, hospitality is “**making space.**” The idea of making space is something you are all familiar with, as it is a key concept here at Cornerstone. For example, our mission statement says we *make space* for Jesus to shape people together in God’s love. Making space means we create a place or an environment for something to happen. Making space is an intentional act - we have to *choose* to make space. In hospitality we make *physical* space – such as providing a place at the table, an extra seat around the fire, or an extra bed for a guest. We make *relational* space by valuing another person, by listening to their story, or by building a relationship that turns into friendship. We make *intellectual* space by being open to someone’s opinions or beliefs, even when they differ from our own. Hospitality also includes “**welcoming a stranger.**” While it is often easier to welcome those we know, biblical hospitality invites us to welcome the stranger – that person you don’t know, such as the new kid in your class, a colleague at work, or a neighbour on your street. Finally, hospitality is welcoming that stranger “**with God’s loving welcome.**” As we experience God’s loving welcome, we then to extend it to others. So, how has God welcomed us? Let’s find out.

This morning, we are going to explore two stories in which Jesus demonstrates God’s loving welcome to others. Both stories have to do with Jesus’ “table fellowship” or meals. In our imaginations, we are going to pull up a seat at the table, look around to see who is on the guest list, and eavesdrop in on the conversations at the table. These “meals with Jesus” provide insight not only into God’s hospitality, but into how we might offer hospitality as well.

Our first meal with Jesus takes place in the house of Matthew. We find the story in Matthew 9:9-

13:

*<sup>9</sup> As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.*

*<sup>10</sup> Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. <sup>11</sup> But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?"*

*<sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do." <sup>13</sup> Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."*

Mark's version of the story tells us that the Jesus is "beside the lake," probably near the town on Capernaum on the north shore of Lake Galilee. Here, possibly near the docks where ships would arrive to offload their goods, Matthew waits to collect the taxes required. Now remember this story takes place in the militarized zone of ancient Palestine. The Jews were a conquered and oppressed people under the rule of Rome, the superpower of the time. Taxation was high, and people struggled under the weight of the many taxes they had to pay. Tax collectors like Matthew were a nasty bunch. They were dishonest Jewish men who demanded higher tax payments than required so they could line their own pockets with hefty profits. Tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews because they exploited, cheated and stole from their own people, they collaborated (or worked with) their Roman oppressors, and they were ritually unclean because of their contact with Gentiles.

Now back to our story... here comes Jesus. He stops at the tax booth of Matthew, and invites Matthew to become his disciple. Imagine you had been in the crowd and had just witnessed Jesus invite Matthew to be his disciple. Knowing what you do about tax collectors, what would your reaction be? Write your thoughts into the chat. **PAUSE** As I imagined this scene, I could almost hear a gasp coming from the crowd. Had they seen and heard right? Was Jesus actually inviting

a hated traitor to become his disciple? But Jesus does invite Matthew, and Matthew responds by following Jesus.

Now the scene switches to a dinner party at Matthew's house. As we take our place at the table, we look around the room, and see who is on the guest list. Jesus and his disciples are here (Okay, that's good) But Matthew has also invited all his friends – who happen to be other tax collectors and “sinners.” Those at the party were the undesirables, those with bad reputations, the sinners of the town. For those living in the time of Jesus, the word ‘sinners’ was code for really, really bad people. Sinners were wicked, immoral people who refused to obey God's law. They were the ones who, if you saw them coming, you would cross the street to avoid. No one would ever think of eating with a tax collector or a sinner – they were social outcasts, pushed to the margins, because of their lifestyle.

Back in Jesus' day, and even today in our time, eating a meal with others contained a lot of hidden meanings. Meals were governed by many rules, including dietary and purity laws, which determined who was welcomed at the table. Dietary laws dictated how foods were prepared which meant that a Jew could not eat with a non-Jew (or Gentile) for fear of breaking kosher laws. Purity laws also determined who could come to the table. The Pharisees would have said that “Only those who are clean are welcome at the table,” and they would refuse to eat with anyone they considered unclean for fear of becoming unclean themselves. Meals also reflected social status: being invited to a meal showed that you belonged to a special social group, and eating a meal with someone indicated friendship. So meals were clear boundary markers, in which some were included and others excluded. Being invited to a party or a meal

meant you were ‘in’ and not ‘out’ of the group. Invitations to dinner meant you belonged. Not being invited meant you didn’t.

So when Jesus joins tax collectors and sinners at the table, the Pharisees are horrified. Jesus breaks all the rules as he sits down to eat with his new friends. In his response to the Pharisees, we get a clear glimpse of Jesus’ mission: he has come to heal the physically and spiritually sick. In sharing a table with these spiritually sick sinners, Jesus extends welcome, he builds relationships, and he creates opportunities for redemptive, healing conversations.

Jesus quotes from the OT prophet Hosea: mercy is elevated over sacrifice. *Mercy* relates to being generous, having compassion, forgiving others, and providing all types of healing. God is a God of mercy. A frequent OT description of God says “The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! (Who is) slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.” Mercy is a justice word. It shows how welcome and hospitality are related to justice. Mercy and justice seek to make things right, to bring healing and restoration; to contribute to shalom - to human flourishing. For Jesus, extending hospitality to the outcast is an act of mercy, and relationships are prioritized over religious rituals such as sacrifice.

We are now going to another meal with Jesus – and kids, this one happens to be a picnic!

We read about it in Luke 9: 10-17:

*<sup>10</sup> When the apostles returned, they told Jesus everything they had done. Then he slipped quietly away with them toward the town of Bethsaida. <sup>11</sup> But the crowds found out where he was going, and they followed him. He welcomed them and taught them about the Kingdom of God, and he healed those who were sick.*

*<sup>12</sup> Late in the afternoon the twelve disciples came to him and said, “Send the crowds away to the nearby villages and farms, so they can find food and lodging for the night. There is nothing to eat here in this remote place.”*

*<sup>13</sup> But Jesus said, “You feed them.”*

*“But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. “Or are you expecting us to go and buy enough food for this whole crowd?”<sup>14</sup> For there were about 5,000 men there.*

*Jesus replied, “Tell them to sit down in groups of about fifty each.”<sup>15</sup> So the people all sat down.<sup>16</sup> Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread and fish to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people.<sup>17</sup> They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers!*

This story begins by saying the disciples returned. Where had they been? The first part of Luke 9 tells us that Jesus had sent his disciples out on a mission trip to practice what they had been learning from him. While they were away, they had relied on the welcome and hospitality of others who provided them with a place to stay and food to eat. They had cast out demons, cured the sick and taught about the reign of God that was demonstrated through their actions. Now they are back, and Jesus wants to take them on a retreat to rest and review the events of their trip. But that was not to be...

The crowds find Jesus and interrupt his plans. Here we see the hospitality of Jesus – instead of sending the crowd away, Jesus allows for this interruption in order to extend welcome. He welcomes them with God’s welcome – he heals those who are sick, and he teaches them about the Kingdom of God.

Later in the day, the disciples are concerned that the crowds are not heading home. They ask Jesus to send the crowd away to find food and lodging. Hold on... send guests away hungry? That doesn’t seem very hospitable does it? In response, Jesus invites his disciples to practice hospitality, and feed the crowd. .. but the disciples cannot imagine how they can do this with only 5 loaves and 2 fish. It’s interesting, isn’t it? The disciples had just returned from a successful mission trip where they had experienced God’s power and provision in their own ministry and through the hospitable welcome of others. How quickly they have forgotten! How

little imagination they have for the ways in which God can use them to extend hospitality to the crowd. But we mustn't be too hard on them, for we are guilty of the same things, aren't we? I certainly am.

Now Jesus becomes the divine host who provides a picnic for the crowd in the wilderness...but he has a partner! John's version of the story tells us that a boy was willing to share his lunch with Jesus. Now I am sure there must have been others in the crowd who had also brought a lunch that day, but they didn't offer their lunch. Instead, it was a child who participated with Jesus in extending hospitality. Kids, listen up! You get to help Jesus welcome others! Isn't that awesome? Jesus takes whatever you offer him, and uses it. None of you are too young to be hospitable. And despite the great crowd, that little boy's lunch becomes a huge feast that even had lots of left-overs!

This picnic echoes a passage from Isaiah 25, in which a future banquet is anticipated. In Isaiah 25 God has spread a feast – a banquet- with the best wine and the choicest of foods. Guests at the table represent people from all over the world, who are feasting and celebrating with God and in the presence of each other. Around that future table God's kingdom is realized in the new community made up of those whom God has rescued and restored. We see parallels between this future banquet in Isaiah 25 we look forward to all nations feasting with God in God's Kingdom, and this picnic on the hillside people feast together with Jesus as a picture of how God's kingdom is beginning to burst forth. The picnicking crowd included people who would usually avoid eating together – men, women and children, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, especially religious and not-so-religious, clean and unclean. Here the boundaries are broken down as they all feast together, enjoying the abundant provision of Jesus. Here we get a

glimpse of not only what *will be* in the future, but of what *can be* now – as we make space to welcome others with the same loving welcome God has extended through Jesus.

These stories – the invitation of Matthew to follow Jesus, the dinner party with sinners, the picnic on the hillside – they all give us glimpses into God’s hospitality. In these stories we find three key themes:

**Welcome** – In the hospitality of Jesus, the Kingdom of God bursts forth bringing healing, restoration, and flourishing. Jesus shows us a boundary-breaking God who, in his loving mercy seeks those on the margins and brings them close, pulls up a chair, and invites them to sit beside him at the table. As followers of Jesus, we are called to welcome all to the table, yet we still erect boundaries that keep people out. We tend to label, isolate, push those who don’t measure up to the margins, and exclude them from the table. Jesus models God’s welcome for us, and then calls us to do the same as he has done.

**Abundance and generosity** – God’s welcome is characterized by feasting and abundance. With God, there is always enough: there is enough time, enough food, and enough space for everyone. Hospitality will demand your resources; but remember that your resources are on loan from One who has storehouses full of resources to share. Let’s make space for others from a belief in God’s abundance, instead of a fear of scarcity.

**Transformation** –Experiencing God’s hospitality changes a person. Matthew was transformed from tax collector to disciple, and then to evangelist as he introduced his friends to Jesus. When God extends hospitality, empty stomachs are filled and hungry souls are satisfied.

Now let’s pull this together. How do we practice hospitality? I’d like to wrap this up with three thoughts:



First – Some of you might need to experience God’s welcome today. If this is you, I encourage you to sit for a while in these stories this week, to soak in the hospitality of God, and let the Spirit whisper God’s loving and merciful welcome to you. Hear his love for you, sense his deep acceptance of you, let him satisfy your hungry soul. In a few moments we will come to the table again as we remember the ultimate act of hospitality as Jesus gave his life for us. Come, eat, and be filled.

Second: I’d like you to consider who needs to experience God’s welcome through you? These empty chairs around the table represent opportunities to welcome others. Who is the stranger, or even the “sinner” who needs to experience your welcome, inclusion, and friendship. Who are you being called to make space for? It might be a neighbour, someone with a different faith background, or whose lifestyle you disagree with. It might be your class mates who is lonely, or someone who is unkind to you. Ask God to show you who needs to experience God’s welcome through you.

Third: Let’s imagine creative ways to extend God’s loving welcome through hospitality. Now you might be thinking “this is all well and good, but how are we to practice hospitality in the middle of a lockdown and a pandemic!” We can still make space for others in lockdown.

**Relational space:** Hospitality is all about relationships! We extend hospitality in lockdown through phone calls, emails, zoom calls, notes in the mail, distanced walks or chats from your driveway or front door. Listening! Be encouraging and kind to cashiers, other essential workers, to those on the front line.

Cornerstone, you have extended hospitality by writing notes to our neighbours closest to Cornerstone Center, and to frontline workers. You have written notes and prepared care bags for LTC residents and bus drivers, delivery persons, and those sleeping on the street.

**Make space by providing for the needs of others –**

- Grocery shopping for an immunocompromised neighbor
- Walking your elderly neighbour's dog
- Make dinner for a single mom, exhausted essential workers, or those who are homeless
- Cornerstone contributions: Food to CSO, food for pantry, supporting Crisis preg centre, woman's shelters, supported survivors of trafficking
- **In our jobs:**
  - Check in with our colleagues to see how they are doing
  - Some of you are essential workers who, just by going into work and putting yourself at risk are demonstrating hospitality. I am a nurse, and am in the hospital many days of each week. I view my work as a way in which I extend God's hospitality through caring for the sick. Others of you can imagine how you use your work to extend God's loving welcome to others

**In our schools – (once they are open again)**

- Inviting someone to sit with you at lunch
- Showing a new kid around the school
- Watching for the kids who seem lonely and being a friend to them

I'd like to give you a moment to do some holy dreaming. What is bubbling up for you as you have heard these stories? Where is Jesus nudging you today? Take the next minute to imagine one action item you could do this week to extend hospitality to another – then put it in the chat...

As we end, I'd like to share with you a story about hospitality. My family is friends with a family who would not identify as Jesus followers. We became friends through hospitality - by hanging out together and sharing meals at our house or theirs. Last year, just before Covid shut everything down, our friends started coming to Open Table. For those of you new to Cornerstone, Open Table is this wonderful dinner we shared every Thursday evening at Cornerstone Center. I remember one Open Table in particular. Our friends were going through some really rough waters with their kids. That night, their daughter chose to sit alone at the end of the long table where we were eating. Her head was down on the table. I watched as two young girls from Cornerstone came and sat with her. As they began to talk with her, her head came up and she was drawn into the conversation. Slowly she began to smile, and engage with the girls. It was nothing less than a holy moment. That same night, their son was invited to play games with other boys at the table. Later, the kids all went into the gym to play together. This was exceptional because these kids struggle socially – but here they were, welcomed, embraced, and included in the group. They were having so much fun! At the same time, several of you came by our table and introduced yourselves to our friends. Some of you sat down and engaged in conversation with them.

Cornerstone, you practiced hospitality that night. You made space to welcome strangers with the loving welcome of Jesus. This is what practicing hospitality does. In practicing hospitality we are invited to live into a new story – a story where those on the outside are welcomed to the table, where strangers become friends, sinners become disciples, and hungry people are filled. It doesn't get much better than that.

**Benediction** (Amy Oden God's Welcome)

God has welcomed each of us. We live in the abundant life of God's welcome.

You don't need to become someone or something else. Just live into the welcome you already know.

You have it. Now claim it, share it, and give thanks to God. Amen.

"We're going to hear from Peter now about a special churchwide event that is happening this coming Saturday".