Biblical Hospitality May 24, 2022
Series: *Distinct*

We're in a series called *Distinct*, which explores Cornerstone's seven distinctives—that mix of values and practices that combine to give us the unique character and culture we have as local church.

If you're new here, this series will help you understand what makes this church tick, and hopefully help you begin to discern how God might be calling you to be a part of it. If you're not so new here, our prayer is that God will reinforce those things for you through this series.

The Cornerstone distinctive we're going to unpack today is Biblical Hospitality. This is one of our Core Values, and it has to do with how:

> *We welcome the stranger into our church, homes, hearts and lives as God has welcomed us in Christ.*

Here's the plan for this message. First, I'll set the stage a bit, and then share some important biblical background on the subject of hospitality. After that, we'll look at a cluster of practical takeaways, followed by a video featuring a powerful story of biblical hospitality involving a family from Cornerstone and a refugee named Jonas.

There will also be a special opportunity for you to participate in that story of hospitality as it continues to unfold.

So that's what lies ahead of us. Let's get into it, shall we?

In scripture, those of us who follow Jesus are exhorted to:

> Always be eager to practice hospitality. [1]

It's clear enough from this verse that hospitality should mark our lives as Christians. But what is "hospitality" exactly?

We can begin by stressing that **Biblical hospitality is about WELCOMING THE STRANGER.**

Of course, it's always a good thing to welcome and accept people you already know, people you're familiar with, who are like you— but that's not the same thing as biblical hospitality.

For many people nowadays, including Christians, the term hospitality brings to mind things like the hotel and restaurant industries, dinner parties designed to impress socially desirable guests, and cozy evenings spent entertaining close friends. Such popular notions of hospitality cause author Joan Chittister to lament that:

> The biblical value of hospitality has been domesticated, and is now seen more as one of the social graces than a spiritual act and a holy event.[2]

---

[1] Romans 12:13b (NLT)
[2] Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), 126.

Much of today's church does not comprehend, let alone practice hospitality as the Bible understands it. Which is why the late great Christian author Henri Nouwen wrote that:

> If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. [3]

Allow me at this point to clarify with a bit more precision what we mean by biblical hospitality. You may want to snap a photo of this definition in case you want to refer back to it later.

> Biblical hospitality is the attitude and practice of welcoming strangers by providing an environment in which they are free to become accepted, included, and loved. This relationship opens up the possibility for eventual communion among the host, the stranger, and God. The stranger is any person or group unknown to the host. [4]

The practice of hospitality to strangers was woven right into the social fabric of ancient culture in and around the land of the Bible. Back then, if you had to travel, the journey was always dangerous, the climate was always unforgiving; there were no hotels, restaurants, or convenience stores. And there were gas stations where you could fill up your… *camel* (even if you had the means to pay north of $2/litre for camel fuel).

No, you had to depend entirely on the hospitality of strangers you met along the way. You had to rely on the generosity of people *you didn't know* to invite you into their home, share meals with you, offer you water from their well, tend your animals, and give you a safe place to spend the night.

In those days, and in that culture, hospitality was a matter of survival for travelers. And *showing* hospitality to travelling strangers when they came knocking at your door was considered a sacred duty.

But no other ancient near Eastern culture expressed or valued hospitality in quite the same way that God's people did in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Why is that? It's because **God calls his people to reflect his heart for strangers.** Would you repeat that with me?

In the Old Testament, the stranger was often referred to as an *alien* or *foreigner*—someone from an outside nation or ethnic group who came to live among the people of Israel. God commands his people in Leviticus:

> "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." [5]

This passage and others like it show that God has a special heart for people who are in the vulnerable position of being strangers.

---

[3] Henri J.M Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, Doubleday, 1975), 66.

[4] Adapted from Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 2004), 22.

[5] Leviticus 19:33-34 (NLT)

The people of Israel knew firsthand what it felt like to be strangers in a foreign land, having been enslaved in Egypt for so many years. God's heart went out to them, he rescued them, and made them his very own people.

Now that they had become God's people, God essentially tells them: *Now you must treat the strangers in your midst as I treated you when you were strangers in a foreign land.*

Something very similar applies to those of us who follow Jesus today. We too were once aliens and strangers to God and to his people. As the New Testament says in Ephesians:

> It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God's covenants and promises in Israel, hadn't a clue about what God was doing in the world at large. Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything… That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. [6]

This passage teaches that when you and I were estranged from God and his people because of our sin, Jesus shed his blood so that we could be welcomed into God's very own family.

So if you're a Christian, and you encounter a stranger—someone unknown to you—perhaps someone who is different from you, whether racially, culturally, socially, mentally, physically—*remember, remember, remember* that God calls you to reflect his heart for strangers— the same heart he had toward you when were estranged from God and his family.

"But what about *stranger danger*?" some of you may be wondering. Maybe you're thinking, "I've been trained since I was a child to be wary of strangers." If God calls us to reflect his hospitable heart toward strangers, how do we overcome the very real *fear of strangers* that many of us have?

First, let me say that the practice of hospitality doesn't mean that we throw safety precautions and good common sense out the window. We need to use appropriate discretion when interacting with strangers.

But our main problem isn't that we err on the side of risk. Our main problem is that too many of us err on the side of caution—of being too hesitant, too distant, too guarded when it comes to the stranger.

What we need to learn is how to see an encounter with a stranger not so much as a risk to be avoided, but rather as an opportunity to embrace. Scripture offers us an incentive to do so by showing us that **in welcoming the stranger, we open ourselves to God.** Would you repeat that with me?

In the New Testament, Hebrews 13:2 says:

> Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! [7]

[6] Ephesians 2:11-13, 19 (MSG)
[7] Hebrews 13:2 (NLT)

This verse was written with an Old Testament passage in mind—a passage from Genesis. [8] In that passage, Abraham opens his home to three travelling strangers who turn out to be angels bringing a message of blessing from God himself.

This verse from Hebrews picks up on that story, and suggests that to show hospitality to strangers is to open ourselves wide to God's presence, to God's transforming work in and through us. In Matthew 25, Jesus himself says:

> "I was a stranger and you invited me in." [9]

Believers throughout the centuries have seen in these words a promise that in welcoming the stranger, we open ourselves up in a mysterious, but very real way to the presence of Jesus himself. When you welcome the stranger, you get more of Jesus.

Not only that, the stranger may well get more of Jesus. The Holy Spirit flows through every hospitality exchange in ways you can't even discern or imagine—ways that often seem ordinary and unassuming, but are nonetheless spiritually transforming. God quietly gets into the middle of it all, and does his thing.

So open your heart if you're ready for more of Jesus today. Open your home. Open your schedule. Open your life—*to the stranger*.

Let's talk about some practical ways of doing that, starting right here at church.

In the context of a worship service like this, who represents the stranger?

Primarily, it's people who are newcomers to the church. In fact, over the two years of the pandemic, we estimate that at least 300 newcomers have started attending Cornerstone, and we have reasons to believe that estimate is conservative. So we have no shortage of newcomers here, and we're so glad God continues to draw more and more people into this church family!

If you consider Cornerstone your church home, perhaps you'd be willing to **serve on a Welcome Team**. We always could use more greeters, ushers and parking lot attendants. We also need online hosts to welcome those who join us virtually via livestream. To learn more about any of these opportunities, please contact our Welcome Director, Mymy Leung at mymy@cornerstonechurch.ca.

Next, whether or not you ever formally serve in our Welcome Ministries, **see yourself a host**. I cannot express how important this is. Everyone who considers Cornerstone their home church, say this with me: "I'm a host!"

Cornerstone is known as a welcoming church, and the reason that's the case is because many of the folks of this congregation see themselves as hosts, and make a point of personally welcoming newcomers whenever the opportunity presents itself.

For some of you, a first step in this direction might be to **return to the habit of in-person worship attendance.** We know we're still in a pandemic and not everyone is ready to do that just yet. Of course, we're so very glad for all of you who are joining us online. But we have lots of newcomers attending in-

[8] See Genesis 18
[9] Matthew 25:34c (NIV)

person every week, and by attending in-person yourself, you'll have a great opportunity to practice hospitality.

You can do so by coming on Sundays and challenging yourself to personally **greet at least one newcomer each week**—whether it's before or after service. It doesn't sound like much, but it really adds up if you come each Sunday.

When you welcome a newcomer to Cornerstone, it's fine to keep the encounter short and sweet, unless the conversation happens to open up more. Don't smother. Give people space. A few simple comments and questions can be all it takes to get a conversation flowing quite naturally:

> Hi, I'm not sure I've seen you here before. Is this your first time? It is? Well welcome! My name is Steve. How did you hear about Cornerstone? Do you live in the area?

Once you've introduced yourself to a newcomer, can you introduce the person to anyone else you know?

Younger people—the challenge of hospitality applies to the ministries that you're a part of as well. When a new student comes to your Sunday school class, Youth Group or Young Adults meeting, see yourself as a host.

Because surely there have been times in your life when you've been the new kid, right? Remember what that felt like? Remember how good it felt when someone welcomed you, and made you feel included and accepted? Now you're the host, and God is calling you to do that for someone else.

You see, regardless of age, we all need to **engage in empathy thinking.** That's what God asked the people of Israel to do, encouraging them to remember what it was like to be strangers in a foreign land.

So get in touch with memories and feelings you have about your own experiences in life of being the newcomer, the foreigner, the outsider, the person who was different, who didn't fit in. How did you feel? What helped you feel welcome? What didn't? Getting in touch with your own feelings and experiences along these lines can motivate you to take compassionate action in terms of showing hospitality to others.

Is your small group open to newcomers? Maybe it's time for you to **invite newcomers to join your small group**.

Or maybe you need to venture beyond the walls of this church building and **serve on our Street Outreach Team** downtown. There you'll act as something of a guest and a host at the same time, as you serve the homeless, and marvel as these strangers—who are in such a different life situation than you are— become friends through the power of Jesus' love. To learn more, email our Outreach Director, Bethany, at bethany@cornerstonechurch.ca.

Let's talk now about practicing hospitality in our homes.

What we want to do is move from seeing our homes strictly as private fortresses that we use to keep the world out, to hospitality spaces that we share with others for the sake of God's mission.

A few of you may be ready to host a foster child, a foreign student, a refugee or an immigrant in transition, a hurting person in need, or a travelling pastor or missionary. But for most of you it will be

more within reach to simply host someone you don't know all that well in your home every once in a while for a meal or dessert.

Fancy isn't necessary. Simple food is fine, and don't feel like your house needs to be perfect, either.

Have your child's friend from school over for a play date and invite one or both parents.

If you have a teenager, can your home be a hangout for his or her friends? That's how I came to know the Lord as a teenager—through the witness of a school buddy's parents who had me over to their house a lot. Through their hospitality, I went from being a stranger, to a friend, to a young disciple of Jesus.

Is there an elderly person in your neighbourhood that you could have over, or that you could go visit? Many elderly folks are lonely, and demographically, there are only going to be more and more seniors around. I'm sure they would love your company.

Is there an immigrant family that's new to the neighbourhood you could invite over? Maybe you could help orient them to the area, and to certain aspects of life in this country.

At work, how can you show hospitality to new co-workers? At school, how can you show hospitality to new students, or to kids that are struggling to fit in?

Note well that when it comes to the practice of biblical hospitality, it's not always about being the host. Sometimes it's about being the guest and to **be willing to receive the hospitality of others**. When Jesus sent out 70 of his followers into the towns and villages to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, he directed them to rely on the hospitality of the townspeople. [10]

When someone you don't know offers hospitality to you, make it a practice to accept the invitation. Because whether you're host or guest, you open yourself up to God when you practice biblical hospitality.

Is there one of those practical ideas that resonates with you? One that you're drawn to? If so, that's probably an area where God is inviting you to take action. What will you do to make sure you follow through?

We have another very special opportunity for all of you to take action. A few years ago, on a cold winter Sunday, a man named Jonas— a refugee from Cameroon— followed a prompting from the Holy Spirit and came to Cornerstone. Here, he met a couple named Don and Leona.

Check out this video that tells there story, and after the video, I'll come back and tell you how you can become a part of their story…

- **Jonas Video** (11 minutes)

- **Invitation to Help** (Steve to return and share the opportunities there are to support Jonas and his family in their ongoing journey. Show the link to the GoFundMe page to be provided.)

[10] See Luke 10:1-12

Call to Action to support Jonas D

Pray

- Pray that the immigration process for Jonas' family would be successful and that all paperwork, medical certificates, etc. will be received and processed in a timely manner (especially in light of the current international immigration crisis).

- Pray that God would provide the funds and a suitable location for Jonas to settle his family.

- Pray that God would lead Jonas in his career, including the possibility of pursuing higher education and training.

- Pray for Jonas' wife and five children back home who haven't seen their husband/father in the past five years. Pray that God would encourage them and give them hope.

Support

- Our goal is to raise $35,000 to help bring Jonas' family from Cameroon to Canada. This will also cover some housing expenses for his family during the first year.
- Contact Person on GoFundMe page - Donald Gallagher, don.m.gallagher@gmail.com, (647) 975-3084
- Name to be used: Jonas D
- [Cherie to create GoFundMe page and provide URL link.]

Share

- Share GoFundMe link with others: https://www.gofundme.com/f/jonas-d