Last March Tom and I were travelling to Barbados. Half way into our flight we heard we were returning to Toronto due to staffing shortages and labour disputes at the airport in Bardbados.. On our arrival back in Toronto, we were told to pick up our luggage and go home, and wait for information from the airline about when our flight would return to Barbados. After collecting our bags, we waited for our ride to come. As we waited, I saw two young mothers, each with a young baby and one older woman talking among themselves. I wondered if they were going home to Barbados, or if they lived in Canada and had a place to go overnight. So I asked them. They told me they did not have a place to stay, and did not have money for a hotel, so would stay overnight in the airport.

After speaking with Tom and our friend who was travelling with us, I invited these women home for the night. I explained that we did not have space in the vehicle that was picking us up, but if they could get an Uber we would love to have them stay with us. They gratefully agreed. As they arranged for an Uber, we headed home. Once home, we rushed around the house, changing sheets on beds and preparing to have two young moms, two babies, and one granny as guests.

Since we were planning to be away for 10 days, we had limited food in our fridge. So we ordered dinner. We had a lovely evening, gathered around our table getting to know each other. We laughed, and learned, and shared stories. Everyone had a bed, as we 'borrowed' Bethany's room for our guests. And at 4 am, we were wakened to Granny singing praise songs in the shower! Later that morning, we headed back to the airport for our flight to Barbados with our new friends. We continue to keep in touch with our Bajan friends over social media.

This is our last sermon in our hospitality series. Steve opened the series with a review of biblical hospitality and the foundation of the practice. Hospitality begins with God's welcome of us – we are all strangers and outsiders who have been seen, sought, loved, and welcomed into God's family. And we then extend the same welcome we have received to others.

Last week, we learned that in welcoming strangers, we welcome Jesus in disguise. When we welcome strangers (especially the most vulnerable) we welcome Jesus. And these in these encounters of welcome we both meet and model Jesus in mutually transformative ways

Today, we are going deep into the nitty gritty of how we welcome others. Using the story of Peter and Cornelius we began earlier, we are going to examine two primary concepts related to hospitality: Posture and practice.

Posture is our way of being in the world. When you hear the word 'posture' many of you probably think about how you are to stand or sit up straight, but I will be talking

about a different meaning of the word. I'm using posture to talk about how we see the world and those in it, how we hold ourselves in relation to others, and ultimately how we act. Our posture sets the stage for our practice.

A welcoming—or hospitable—posture leans in, making space for another person. An inhospitable posture leans away from the person.

For us to welcome another person, we need a willingness to welcome the other. Theologian Miroslav Volf calls this **"the will to embrace."** Sometimes that will comes easily; sometimes it is very difficult. But as we experience God's embrace, our will to embrace the other will continue to be shaped by God's welcome of us.

The passage we heard this morning contains several encounters of hospitality and gives us insight into both our posture and our practice. We'll return to the story throughout our time together.

Peter and Posture

1. **Peter's posture made it difficult for him to extend hospitality to Cornelius.**

As the story opens, Peter's posture is one of turning away. Why is that? What stood in the way of Peter being hospitable to Cornelius?

Between these two men was a seemingly insurmountable religious, cultural, and political divide. It is difficult for us to imagine the distance between them.

Peter was an observant Jew whose religion and culture were deeply intertwined. His entire way of life was shaped by Jewish laws concerning purity and pollution—what was clean and unclean. People could become unclean through contact with unclean people, objects, or food. A faithful Jew would not enter a Gentile's home, welcome a Gentile into their own home, or eat non-Kosher food. For Peter, crossing these boundaries and willingly entering into proximity with a Gentile would have been unthinkable.

And the divide was not only religious and cultural: it was also political. Peter was a Jew living under Roman oppression; Cornelius was a Roman centurion—one of the people representing that oppressive power.

Think about this from Peter's perspective. As a Jew living in Galilee, Peter would have witnessed—and perhaps experienced—the mistreatment of his own people by Roman soldiers. He would have seen the effects of Roman occupation, paid taxes to Rome, and possibly witnessed fellow Jews crucified. He likely carried anger and hostility toward those who represented Roman rule.

When we read this story through modern eyes, we can easily miss the depth of hostility between Peter and Cornelius. But we don't have to look far to find similar religious,

cultural, and political divisions in our own world that help us imagine how deep the divide was between Peter and Cornelius.

With this enormous divide and Peter's posture of leaning away, how will Peter ever turn toward Cornelius? God is asking him to go and meet a Roman centurion. How will this work?

For Peter, the triggers that caused him to lean away were religious, cultural, and political. **What are our triggers?**

Each of us has things that make us lean away rather than lean in.

Politics and religion. Our world is experiencing intense polarization around political and religious differences. What do we feel when someone expresses views very different from our own? What about someone whose religious practices or appearance are unfamiliar to us—a person wearing a hijab, burka, or turban, or someone whose religious expression looks different from ours?

Hygiene and appearance. We can easily lean away from people whose hygiene or appearance doesn't meet our standards of cleanliness or acceptability. Think about the unhoused person on the street who may smell, or someone whose clothing or appearance we find offensive.

Social differences. All of us have people in our lives who make us uncomfortable—the person who is socially awkward or quirky, who enters our personal space, or who catches us in a conversation we would rather avoid.

Often our triggers make sense to us. But extending hospitality means learning to recognize and work through those triggers. More importantly, it means opening ourselves to Jesus and allowing him to transform us.

As we spend time with Jesus and follow his ways, our minds are renewed. We begin to see past differences and learn to lean in and welcome rather than lean away. This isn't a one-time transformation. It is a posture we practice. Leaning toward people who are different from us is like a muscle: it needs to be exercised and strengthened.

2. **God intervenes to help Peter confront his inhospitable posture.**

The Spirit nudges Peter to lean toward Cornelius. His posture must change; he must develop the will to embrace a Roman centurion.

In some ways, God seems to be asking more of Peter than of Cornelius. Peter is the one who has experienced oppression. Peter is the one who must lay down his anger and hostility toward Rome and those who represent it. Peter is the one whose heart and mind need to be transformed.

God has been slowly transforming Peter's posture toward outsiders for years. Peter had spent time with Jesus and watched Jesus demonstrate boundary-crossing hospitality. Jesus welcomed sinners and tax collectors, women, Samaritans, children—people who were often considered outsiders, undesirable, or "less than." Again and again, Jesus made space for those whom society pushed to the margins.

After Pentecost, the gospel continued to spread among those considered outsiders. Peter probably heard that Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch embraced Jesus, challenging long-held assumptions about who could belong among God's people.

Even Peter's current circumstances show that his understanding has already begun to shift. He is staying in the home of Simon the Tanner—a person whose work with dead animals would have made him ceremonially unclean.

We see, then, a series of small movements preparing Peter for this much larger one.

And then God gives Peter a vision that nudges him to be more welcoming.

While Peter is on the roof praying, he sees a sheet lowered from heaven, filled with animals considered both clean and unclean. God tells Peter to eat, but Peter refuses because doing so would violate the boundaries he has always observed.

Then God tells him: **"Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean."**

That is the crucial point. **God has deemed them clean.**

I'm struck by the grace and goodness of God in this story. God doesn't ask Peter to transform his posture all at once. God patiently and gently shapes him, teaching him to see hospitality across boundaries.

God has always intended to welcome Gentile outsiders. And God has been preparing Peter—step by step—to participate in that welcome.

We now continue the story as I read the remainder of the chapter.

23 So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa.

24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. **26** But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being just like you!" **27** So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

28 Peter told them, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer

think of anyone as impure or unclean. **29** So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me."

30 Cornelius replied, "Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. **31** He told me, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! **32** Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.' **33** So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you."

34 Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. **35** In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. **36** This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. **37** You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. **38** And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

39 "And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross,[c] **40** but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, **41** not to the general public,[d] but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. **42** And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. **43** He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name."

44 Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. **45** The Jewish believers[e] who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. **46** For they heard them speaking in other tongues[f] and praising God.

Then Peter asked, **47** "Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" **48** So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

3. **Hospitality transforms Peter's posture as he interacts with the strangers God places in his path.**

God tells Cornelius to send messengers to Peter and ask him to come to Caesarea. Peter is still puzzling over his vision when the Gentile messengers arrive. Then the Spirit instructs him to go with them.

Peter goes outside to meet them. This follows the hospitality practices of the day: strangers were first assessed in a public or safe place before being welcomed. Peter listens to their story, and it is compelling enough that he welcomes these Gentiles into Simon's home and offers them a place to stay.

For Peter, this is a significant step. He has crossed the boundary of welcoming Gentiles into his Jewish home. He hasn't yet had to cross the food boundary—the house still has kosher food—but that boundary is coming.

Peter then travels with the messengers and several Christian believers from Joppa. The journey takes two days. I imagine they spend that time getting to know one another—learning names, sharing stories, and beginning to build relationships.

Proximity begins to reduce barriers. As people spend time together and rub shoulders with one another, biases and assumptions can begin to shift. Trust grows, and Peter's posture moves further from leaning away and toward leaning in.

When they arrive in Caesarea, Cornelius becomes the host and Peter the guest. Peter crosses another significant boundary by entering the home of a Roman centurion.

Peter now understands the meaning of his vision. He says:

"You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." (v. 28)

Peter realizes that The vision was never really about animals. **It was about people. It was about seeing people as God sees them, rather than through the boundaries and categories we create.**

Then, as Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles in the house. The Jewish believers from Joppa are astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles. Peter baptizes these new believers and stays with them for several days.

Again, **proximity deepens relationship.** Peter's posture has been transformed through a series of encounters that move him closer and closer to people he once considered outsiders.

This is part of what it means to build bridges across difference—and it is at the heart of hospitality.

From Posture to Practice

Hospitality begins with posture. We are invited to respond to the stranger or person in front of us with a **will to embrace**. When our posture changes, we begin to see the

person who needs hospitality. **Posture leads to practice and shapes how we practice.**

So what does hospitality actually look like?

1. See, Stop, and Step In

The first two go together: **we see, and then we stop.**

See. Our eyes must be open to notice the stranger. If we don't see the person in front of us, we won't move toward hospitality.

Peter was told by the Spirit that strangers were at his door and that he was to go with them. Who are the strangers in front of us? Who might the Spirit be nudging us to notice?

Stop. Hospitality requires us to stop and pay attention. It means being willing to be interrupted.

Peter was praying and waiting for a meal when he was interrupted—first by the vision and then by the Gentile messengers at his door. We might think of these as **holy interruptions**: moments when we notice someone's need and pause long enough to respond with empathy and compassion.

After Peter sees and stops, God calls him to **step in**—to cross several boundaries in order to welcome the other.

The action will look different depending on the situation. Hospitality may involve meeting physical, emotional, or spiritual needs: providing food, drink, or clothing; offering welcome and companionship; caring for someone who is sick; visiting someone who is incarcerated; offering prayer, encouragement, or spiritual support.

The kind of action is less important than taking the first step.

Start small. Make eye contact and say hello. Keep a few questions in mind to help begin a conversation. Take cookies to a neighbour. Invite someone for a walk. Start where you are and build from there.

Peter's own transformation happened gradually. He first watched Jesus welcome outsiders. Then he began to practice what he had seen Jesus do. Over time, he became more confident and courageous in extending hospitality.

Hospitality is like a muscle: the more we practice it, the stronger it becomes.

2. Embrace Proximity

We cannot offer hospitality without proximity.

When we share a meal, prepare food together, or share living space, we begin to know one another. We are influenced—and changed—by one another.

Proximity also reveals our biases and prejudices. Becoming aware of those biases is an important first step toward transformation; we cannot change what we do not recognize.

And proximity allows us to see beyond the surface of another person's life—to understand their circumstances, needs, and the injustices they may face.

3. Don't Do It Alone

Practice hospitality in community.

Peter didn't travel to Caesarea alone. He brought other believers with him, perhaps to witness what God was doing, but also for companionship, safety, and support.

Hospitality can be more than any one person can manage. One person in Gander could never have cared for the thousands of passengers who arrived there after 9/11. But an entire community could.

We need one another to practice hospitality well.

4. **Accept Limitations and Solutions**

As we practice hospitality, we will encounter real fears and limitations. Welcoming a stranger involves risk and vulnerability. There are concerns about personal safety, being taken advantage of, difficult relationships, and our own limited capacity to meet another person's needs.

These concerns are real. So how do we practice hospitality wisely?

1. Fear of the Stranger

We have all been taught to be cautious around strangers. How do we welcome people while also protecting ourselves?

Hospitality does not mean abandoning wisdom or caution.

In Peter's time, strangers were often assessed in a public place before being welcomed into a home. We can do the same. Meet someone at church, over coffee, at an event, or in another public setting. Talk with your neighbour on the lawn before inviting them inside. Have a barbecue before offering someone a place in your home.

Hospitality includes discernment. There will be times when caution is appropriate.

2. Limited Resources

We may have limited time, space, food, energy, or money. These are real limitations.

Hospitality doesn't have to be extravagant. It might be a cup of tea and store-bought cookies. It might be a walk with a neighbour.

When we welcomed the mothers, babies, and grandmother into our home, we weren't prepared. We changed sheets, rearranged sleeping arrangements, blew up an air mattress, and ordered dinner. But as I look back, I also see how God had already provided. We had lots of fruit, yogurt, things the babies would be able to eat. No one went hungry. We find that God provides time and again.

While limitations are real, they should not limit us. We can easily live with a scarcity mentality, assuming we don't have enough. But the God of hospitality will provide what we need. Just ask any of the outreach team who serves our downtown unhoused friends. Not once has the team run out of food, even though the food taken down was less than the people we met. Somehow, God provides, and we always have enough.

That's not to say that we are to run ourselves ragged and ignore our own needs or our families needs when practicing hospitality. There will be times we must say no even though we want to help. Sometimes we cannot help, but we can help connect someone with a person or organization that can.

3. People and Their Stories Are Messy

Sometimes we encounter people whose needs are beyond our skills or capacity. They may have complex histories, disabilities, mental health challenges, or difficult social circumstances.

We need wisdom to discern what is ours to do and what is not ours to do.

We don't need to have all the answers. Sometimes the most hospitable thing we can do is become a friend and help someone connect with the professional support they need.

4. Introverts Don't Get a Pass

As an introvert myself, I know how difficult it can be to walk across a room and start a conversation with someone new.

But hospitality is not something we can avoid because we are introverts or because we don't think it is our "gift."

Hospitality is a Christian practice, not a spiritual gift. All of us are called to practice it as we follow Jesus. And if God calls us to it, God also equips us for it.

We all have limitations. Those limitations are real, but they don't have to stop us.

Be discerning. Be generous. Trust God to provide. As Jesus draws us deeper into the practice of hospitality, our capacity grows.

Wrap-Up

Our posture leads to our practice.

Our posture flows from our identity as people who have been loved and welcomed by God—and who are therefore called to welcome the stranger.

Our posture is one of **leaning in**, developing the **will to embrace** those God places in our path.

The practice will look different depending on the situation. Our skills and capacity will grow as Jesus shapes and transforms us.

And we practice hospitality best **in community**.

Before we move on, I want to remind you of the hospitality workshop that is beginning on Oct 19. It runs for 4 weeks this fall, and in this section we will be exploring the biblical foundations for hospitality. Part 1 sets the stage for part 2, which will run early in the New year. That part builds on part 2 and together we will learn more about how to practice hospitality. Registration is open if you would like to join us!

Moving into Communion

It is fitting that we end this series on hospitality at the table of Jesus.

The posture of Jesus toward us has always been one of welcome.

In Scripture, eating at the table signified welcome and belonging. Strangers were welcomed as family.

And the table reminds us of this deep spiritual truth: **through Jesus, we have been brought near and welcomed into God's family.**

All are welcome at this table. Jesus invites you here. There is no one outside his welcome today. All who want to draw near to Jesus and experience his hospitality are welcome.