

August 19, 2018

Church Planting

*How Hospitable are You Really?*

Acts 28:1-6

**Opening Words:** The end is near. You remember my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I began in 2013 and will conclude in a few short weeks. No one is happier than I am. I have called this entire body of work *Church Planting*. I have made a major time commitment to this New Testament book for one reason. We need a revival, and Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. To this date, much has happened. Acts began with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the evangelistic work of the eleven remaining disciples, now Apostles. Then, Saul was converted and became Paul. That led to his three missionary journeys. Once completed, Paul collected a love offering to help the poor in Jerusalem. Instead of being welcomed, he is despised by everyone. That led to his incarceration and his request to travel to Rome. Last week, he began the journey and found himself in the middle of a great storm. The Good News is, he survived the storm and was welcomed by strangers. The topic is hospitality.

In 1900, the Daughters of the American Revolution elected social reformer Jane Addams (1860-1935) to honorary membership. It was a vote they regretted later. Addams's antiwar stance during World War I, and her insistence that even subversives had a right to trial by due process, caused them to expel her. She commented that she had thought her election to the DAR was for life, but now knew it was for good behavior. Or, consider this story. You have have heard it the past.

Groucho Marx (1905-1976) was one of the great entertainers in American history. His daughter was once denied admittance to an exclusive country club. Realizing what had happened, the embarrassed country club sent the Marx family an apology and an application to join. Groucho declined the invitation with the comment, *"I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."* Just think how that club would have benefited with Groucho Marx as a member! Today's message is about hospitality. Our scripture reading is Acts 28:1-6. I have called this message, *How Hospitable are You Really?* This is number sixty-two in the series.

**Acts 28:1-6** Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta.<sup>2</sup> The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. <sup>3</sup> Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. <sup>4</sup> When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live." <sup>5</sup> But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. <sup>6</sup> The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a

long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

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Former First Lady and activist Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) once said, "*True hospitality consists of giving the best of yourself to your guests.*" I can't agree more. If you believe hospitality is important, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-eighth chapter of Acts. (There are twenty-eight chapters in Acts, so the end is near!) When we last left Paul, he and his shipmates were in the middle of a great storm. The shipmates thought they were going to die, but they were wrong. However, they did find themselves shipwrecked on the island of Malta. The author is straightforward with the account. The islanders, strangers, were kind to Paul and the rest. They built a fire because they were cold and wet. According to the text, Paul was gathering brush for the fire. According to the text, a viper, or snake, jumped on Paul and bit him. The islanders saw the cruelty in the situation. He had survived the storm, only to be taken by the viper. However, the viper's bite had no effect on Paul. Instead, Paul throws the viper into the fire. The islanders are impressed and know there is something special about Paul. However, the story is not about herpetology, the study of amphibians and reptiles. The story is about hospitality. In the life of the church, hospitality is important. This is not the only place in the Bible where hospitality is promoted. There are many examples found in both the Old and the New Testaments. Let me give you two.

Do you remember the story in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis? (Genesis 18:1-8) Abraham is sitting at the opening of his tent. In the distance he saw three strangers. We understand those three strangers to be angels. The third angel may have been God, Himself. The text doesn't say Abraham ran into the tent and pretended not to be home. The text does say he ran to the strangers and welcomed them. He offered them water to drink and wash. He asked Sarah to bake bread and he butchered the finest calf. His goal was not just to refresh them. His goal was to welcome them. Do you remember that story? In the Bible, hospitality is important.

Do you remember the story from the sixteenth chapter of Acts? Paul was in Philippi, a Roman colony. On the Sabbath he went outside of the city gates to find a place to pray. He longed to be alone, but that was impossible because a group of women had gathered. He began to speak to the women. One of the women was named Lydia. She was a seller of purple cloth, which means she was wealthy. Lydia believed in the existence of God, but that wasn't enough. The text says God opened her heart to the Good News of Jesus Christ and she was baptized, along with her entire family. That means her husband, children and slaves were all baptized. It is a story of the power of influence. However, the story ends with hospitality. Lydia invited Paul and his party back to her house, as a sign of her sincerity. Do you remember that story? In the Bible, hospitality is important. In the life of the church, hospitality is important too. Today's question is, how hospitable are you? How hospitable are we as a church? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Annually, I am required to fill out a mountain of paperwork for the files of the Annual Conference. I don't know who reads all those forms, and I don't know the exact form. But, I do remember the exact question. This is the question: What are three strengths of your church? In every church I have ever served, including this one, one of the three responses is always the same: We are a friendly church! That has not been my experience. I do not believe the people are lying, but I do think they are delusional. Generally, we are friendly to our friends, but we are not friendly to strangers. Just think about it for a moment. When you see a new face sitting in church, do you talk to them? When you see a new face in church, would you invite them to sit with you? Have you ever seen a stranger sitting at a church dinner and asked them to join you? It is not just about being an extrovert, it is about being genuine. It is about being welcoming. How hospitable are you really?

It has become my custom to return to the church on Sunday evenings. The building is empty, and I look for those registration cards. I know some of you hate them, but they are not designed for you regular worshippers. They are designed for first-time visitors. Those simple cards contain, if filled out, a wealth of information. Their name and address. Their phone number and email address. The person who invited them. On Sunday evenings, I return and use that information. The best is when I get to call visitors. It is nothing serious. I just welcome them to the church and ask if they have any questions. Every discussion is different, but one question I ask always remains the same: "Did anyone talk to you?" Sometimes the answer is YES! Sometimes, the answer is NO! Years ago, one woman, who had been coming for several weeks, said, "Yes! A man told me I had a lovely singing voice." When I inquired who, she replied, "I don't know. I think he was a visitor. I never saw him again." It's a good question. How hospitable are you really? American author and humorist Arnold H. Glasow (1905-1998) once said, *"Some folks make you feel at home. Others make you wish you were."*

In the Bible, hospitality is important. In the life of the church, hospitality is important. In the life of this church, hospitality is extremely important. This is the question you must answer: Why is hospitality important? It is not just a tool to gain new members. It is not just a tool we use to fill our leader roster or gain another giving unit. Hospitality is important because so many people in our society are alone. God created the church because He knew the faith should never be lived out in isolation. Loneliness is one of the great fears in the world today. How many lonely people do you know? How lonely are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) was the lead singer of legendary grunge band *Nirvana*. You remember his story. He took his own life. Despite his widespread fame, great wealth and adulation as a rock star, he grew terribly lonely and depressed. In the days leading up to his suicide one of his diary entries read: *"Somebody, anybody, God help, help me please. I want to be accepted...I'm so tired of crying and dreaming, I'm so so alone."* He is not an isolated case. How many lonely people do you know? How lonely are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Hospitality is one of those things that

sounds simple to human ears, but it is one of those things God uses to transform the world.

Desmond Tutu of South Africa (born 1931) was once asked why he became an Anglican rather than joining some other denomination. He replied that in the days of apartheid, when a black person and a white person met while walking on a footpath, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass, and nod their head as a gesture of respect. "One day" Tutu says, "when I was just a little boy, my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her! I was more than surprised at what had happened and I asked my mother, 'Why did that white man do that?' My mother explained, 'He's an Anglican priest. He's a man of God, that's why he did it.' When she told me that he was an Anglican priest, I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God." Isn't it funny how God can use a little hospitality to do something great? It is not just true of famous world leaders. I have seen it on a smaller scale here too.

Years ago, a woman came to Western Reserve by the name of Bernice. She was the mother of one of our former members. She was not a young woman when she arrived, but she found a home here. She was proud to call Western Reserve her church home. I do not remember her serving on any church committees, but she had a profound effect on this ministry. The reason was simple. She had, what I call, the gift of hospitality. One day, she was walking out of the church after the early church service, as a visitor was walking in. Bernice walked up to the stranger and introduced herself. They exchanged names and then Bernice did something quite amazing. Instead of saying, "Good-bye," and walking to her car, Bernice turned around and walked into the building with the visitor. Did you hear what I said? Bernice had finished worshipping and was going home, but she didn't go home. She returned to the building with her new friend. She sat through a Sunday school class with the visitor, even though she didn't belong to that class. She sat through another worship service and heard the same sermon again with the visitor, so that the visitor wouldn't have to sit alone. She gave the visitor something more valuable than money. She gave the visitor time, and she emotionally invested herself in the visitor. In time, that visitor became a member and has been a true blessing to this church. In time, Bernice went to her true home. She died and went to heaven. When she arrived, Jesus must have greeted her and thanked her for being so hospitable.

The question is not, if Bernice was hospitable. The question is, how hospitable are you? How hospitable are you really? Do you remember the quote from Eleanor Roosevelt? She once said, "*True hospitality consists of giving the best of yourself to your guests.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"