

The Things That Make for Peace



Bible Study Session 4

Title: Extending Peace—“So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them”

Texts: Hebrews 13:1–3, Romans 12:13–21

Goal for the Session: Participants will study the biblical understanding of hospitality and its place in peacemaking. They will consider how we are to welcome and live with neighbors who are different.

What is important to know?

Hospitality plays an important role in the biblical concept of shalom, the things that make for peace. Hospitality means more than making family and guests welcome in our homes; it is about providing for the needs of any person we encounter, particularly the stranger. In biblical times, this was often widows, orphans, the poor, and sojourners from other lands—people who lacked status in a family or the community. Hospitality meant graciously welcoming such people in one’s land, home, or community and providing directly for their needs of food, water, shelter, clothing, and respect. Hospitality and justice are inseparable, for if any person lacks these necessities, justice is not fully present in society, and peace cannot happen without justice.

Although the word hospitality is not found in the Hebrew Scriptures, God reminds the people that because they have been loved and cared for as strangers, they are to act in the same way toward the strangers who come among them: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry” (Exodus 22:21–23; see also Deuteronomy 26:1–11 and Leviticus 19:9–10, 22–34).

In addition to commands to practice hospitality, the Hebrew Scriptures also include examples of hospitality. Abraham greeted three strangers and then shared water, rest, and food with them (Genesis 18:2–8). Abraham didn’t extend hospitality in order to gain the favor of the strangers, and yet they were the messengers who shared God’s plans for Sarah. Ruth, an ancestor of Jesus, provided hospitality to Naomi and received hospitality from Boaz (Ruth 2:1–17). These two acts of hospitality not only met basic human needs but formed new relationships across national, ethnic, and religious lines. Job, in confessing the

sins of his past, included a petition for forgiveness for any times he had not practiced hospitality (Job 31:16–32).

In the New Testament, the Greek word for “hospitality” is *philoxenia*, which literally means “love of strangers.” Jesus both taught hospitality and modeled it in his actions of welcoming strangers, eating with tax collectors and sinners, meeting a foreign gentile woman at the well, and healing without regard to nationality or religion. Jesus appeared as a stranger when he joined two followers on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:28–35). Only when they invited the resurrected Jesus to share the table and bread were their eyes opened to his presence. When we welcome others to our tables and homes, strangers who are guests can become divine hosts.

Many of Jesus’ parables addressed hospitality. In response to the question “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the parable of the Samaritan who was the only one who extended hospitality to a traveler in need (Luke 10:25–37). The story affirms the meaninglessness of human borders, boundaries, and qualifications of worthiness in choosing loving and just actions.

Jesus addressed the attitudes and actions of the religious in the parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11–32). The father shows hospitality to his sons, both of whom have become as strangers: one by running away and wasting his inheritance on riotous living, the other by becoming absorbed with anger and resentment.

Finally, Jesus contrasted God’s values and the world’s values in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46). Our call to do what is loving and just is based neither on the worthiness of the recipient nor on the reward we might receive.

The writer of Hebrews connects the ethical teachings of Jesus on hospitality with the ancient story of Abraham and Sarah, saying, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

What does this mean for our lives?

God expects us both individually and as a faith community to treat people (even strangers and enemies) without partiality. Scripture teaches that hospitality is a moral obligation and an expression of our gratitude for

God's love. Furthermore, we must be open to the ways that God may reveal divine purpose or calling through strangers or others we might not expect. Practicing hospitality is how we are to live as God's people.

The strangers in need in our time are not just widows, orphans, and sojourners. People looking for work and worth have lost homes and lost hope and been abandoned by friends and family. The stranger among us may be someone we have known all our lives but whom we come to find we don't know at all. The stranger may also be someone we will never meet but whose life intersects with ours in hidden and mysterious ways. How are we to hear God's word to us if we turn aside from the very people who may be the messengers of that word?

Practicing hospitality doesn't have to mean that our homes or church buildings become lodging or dining establishments or health care clinics or social service agencies. We can practice hospitality in many places and settings and with other groups. But practicing hospitality cannot be done by simply supporting those other organizations without meeting, being engaged with, and relating to the stranger.

What are we called to do?

Hospitality begins with hearts, minds, and lives that are open to God's transforming presence. Just as in times of old, God may come among us in surprising ways through surprising people. When we place conditions on the worthiness or merit of those we will welcome, we limit our own openness to the Spirit's power and presence. When our focus is more on rules and rituals than on relationships and righteousness, we may miss a message from God. When we move from hostility toward hospitality, our actions bring healing and peace both to those we touch and to our own community as well. We are called to be open to the needs that present themselves to us and to seek out those needs that are not made apparent.

In many cases, the stranger may be close at hand but hidden from sight out of fear or shame. Undocumented workers and people escaping abusive situations are just two such groups that may need the ministry of welcome but are not easily seen. The ministry of hospitality may require us to move out of the comfort zones of our church buildings and homes and into places where we will encounter and relate with the strangers of our time and culture.

Closing Prayer

May God bless you with discomfort, anger, tears, and foolishness.

So that you may live deep within your heart;

So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace;

So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them;

So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Personal Reflections

How would a stranger react to a visit to your congregation?

How may God be speaking a word to you in the presence of a stranger or visitor?